

A Christmas Hope

Isaiah 8:19-9:7

KV 2: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."

Today is the first day of the season of ... Advent. According to others, it may be the first day of the Christmas season, or that has probably already started the day after Thanksgiving ☺ Actually this year, it seems like Christmas started on Thanksgiving. But today is really the first day of the season of Advent. Every year, Advent begins on the 4th Sunday before Christmas, and ends on Christmas Eve. The word "advent" means "coming," or "arrival," and it focuses on the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and at the same time anticipates his second coming. Advent is about preparation for Christmas. Why prepare for Christmas? We actually already do this every year. Every year we make a list, check it twice, find out who's naughty or nice, then buy gifts and wrap them. We decorate trees, write cards, sing songs, and watch Miracle on 34th Street (a popular Christmas movie). All of this enhances the celebration of Christmas. Preparing for Advent also enriches our Christmas experience, but I believe on a deeper, and more important level. When we focus on our need for a Savior, we will rejoice more on the day of his birth. When we think about the hope of Christ, we will be more joyful when we come to celebrate on Christmas, and strengthen our hope and anticipation of his second coming.

If I were to ask, what is your wish this Christmas? I think many of you already can come up with some things. (Some people might already have gifts in mind). But I thought a better question to ask is, what is your hope this Christmas? When I was a kid (not very long ago), our family organized a Secret Santa for all the children, with a \$50 limit, and none of the children needed to pay. On Thanksgiving, we just wrote down what we wanted on a piece of paper, and the adults would draw them out of a hat and buy what we wanted on the list. You can bet that I was excited when Christmas came around. Think about that excitement. Now what is your Christmas hope? Are you as excited for that Christmas hope? What is your hope this Christmas?

Greater far than any treasure in this world, greater far than all the world itself, is a hope from God that Isaiah gave to the Israelites. They were living in great misery and oppression. They were living in great darkness – but Isaiah promised them a light would come that would overcome their darkness. This light would be a Savior, a King who would restore their nation, and the zeal of the Lord Almighty would accomplish this. What Isaiah gave them was a hope in the Lord, and I pray that this Christmas, your hope will be in God: To know Him, to know Him more, to grow your faith in him, to grow your faith in the hope of God and his great salvation. Through this passage we will see why this is the best and greatest hope that we can have when we see how the Israelites were walking in darkness, and how we too walked in darkness. Next, then to see the great light that has dawned that overcame the darkness, and finally, the learn about the zeal of the Lord Almighty, who will accomplish all that is written.

Part I: Walking in Darkness

The Israelites were God's chosen people, *but they walked in darkness because they did not seek the Lord*. Look at v.19, "When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on

behalf of the living?” Look at the verse again, it says, “of *their* God.” God was their God, yet they still did not seek his guidance. It’s funny how some people will believe in spirits and ghosts, but not God. If you walk around town, you can find little shops where they will give you a Tarot Card reading or palm reading. Miss Cleo was once a very popular psychic, who was later exposed for fraud. How about horoscopes, does anyone follow astrology? There was a quote I read once in a similar idea, “Why look to the stars, when you can look to the one who made the stars?” While today, it may seem like fun, it is a grievous sin against God. The Lord says in Lev 20:6, “I will set my face against anyone who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute themselves by following them, and I will cut them off from their people.” Psalm 105:3-4 says, “Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.” Instead of asking and seeking the Lord for guidance, the Israelites went to these mediums and spiritists, and put their faith in the dead rather than in the living God.

Though the Israelite’s were given the Law of Moses, and God’s very own words, *they rejected its instruction*. Here was the second mistake the Israelites made. Verse 20 says, “Consult God’s instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.” The mediums and spiritists did not speak according to God’s word – they either spoke according to what their customers wanted to hear (like Miss Cleo), or they spoke under the influence of demons. Psalm 119:105 says God’s word is a lamp for my feet, and a light on my path. 2 Tim 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” When we base our lives, our thoughts, our attitudes, according to Scripture, we can receive wisdom for life. Often we are in darkness because we lack understanding to do what is right. That’s part of what darkness is – a lack of understanding. No understanding. God’s word can point us in the right direction. When the Israelites ignored or rejected God’s word, they could not receive any light, but continued further into darkness.

In v.21, we find the third mistake the Israelites made – “Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will *curse* their king and their God.” The Israelites did not seek God, they did not obey his word – instead they went to those who would take their money and lead them astray. They became distressed and hungry, famished. Sometimes the consequences of our sin lead us to misery, ruin and trouble – what should be our next step? We should turn to the Lord, who is merciful – but rather than turn to the Lord, the Israelites looked up, and cursed their God and king. It is tempting to curse God when our situation looks bad. Rather than take responsibility and repent from our sin, we yell at God, angry for putting us in that situation.

What then, will be the final result? Look at v.22, “Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.” Finally, it looks like all hope is lost – when we look toward the earth, we only see distress, darkness and fearful gloom. This is the earth without the Lord. Think about the Israelites in this situation. They lived in constant sin against God, in light of all the God has given them – they were his people, but they were unfaithful to him. So God would punish them for their sin, and they were now under threat of invasion and captivity from Assyria. Their punishment was deserved, because of their sin. The result, their gloom, came from their sin. But rather than turn

to the Lord, who has comforted them, and continues to comfort them, and has delivered them before, they curse their God. Now it seems hopeless, and they are thrust into utter darkness. *This is death. There is no life. Only fearful, dreaded, dark gloom.*

When sin entered the world, the earth was plunged into utter darkness. In Gen 6:5, “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.” The world will lie to us, and tell us evil is fun – a few years ago several zombie movies came out, more recently we have vampire movies – and the most popular video games are the ones where you run around shooting people. But true evil is not fun. It is not fun to see real dead bodies. It is not fun to hear gunshots nearby. Verses 19-22 paint a picture of the cycle and oppression of sin. We turn away from the Lord, we reject his word, and finally, when we face the consequences, we curse God. Once we were in darkness. We did not know we were rebellious toward God, but we were. We did not know we rejected his word, but we did. We prefer to talk about things of this world, rather than to talk about the things of God. We preferred to entertain ourselves, rather than read his word. We preferred to try to solve our own troubles, rather than take them to the Lord. We preferred to be angry at someone who angered us, rather than humble ourselves. And finally, because of our sin, whether we know we commit them or not, eventually we die because of our sin. This is the fearful gloom and utter darkness none of us can escape – death, and sometimes we curse God for it.

When God is finally out of the picture, all hope seems to be lost, and we are thrust to utter darkness. And this is the world without God – miserable, full of distress, and under judgment. Look at the world today, from the perspective without God. We live in danger of the fiscal cliff, which may cause another recession in our economy. The Middle East conflict seems to be escalating. Europe seems to be on the brink of collapse. Drug lords rule South and Central America. Crime is on the rise, marriage is on the decline. God is being mocked openly in America and attacked by high profile atheists. The world is in utter darkness – we need a savior, or else there is no hope. In spite of this darkness, we do have hope. In spite of this darkness, Isaiah writes, “Nevertheless...”

Part II: A Light Has Dawned

Look at Ch.9, 1: “*Nevertheless*, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan – “ *Nevertheless*? What does Isaiah mean, *nevertheless*? It means that even though the world is covered in darkness, and there are those thrust into utter darkness, there is hope. It means that for those who are distressed, those who are in fear or dread, there is hope. It means no matter how bleak or dismal the future in this world looks, there is certainly hope. It means for sinners, for those who violated the commands of God, there is most certainly hope.

Can we all read v.2 together: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.” The vision Isaiah saw at first was utterly hopeless. It was dark, gloomy, the world was held captive to sin and suffering for it. But then he saw a glimmer of hope, but not just a glimmer, a great light! Not a light like the moon,

but a light like the sunrise, a dawning over the land of deep darkness. Death cast its gloomy shadow over us, determined to destroy us, but the light shines even over death, and *death itself is powerless! Oh what a great and wonderful marvelous light! Oh what a great light to overcome all darkness!*

In my old office there were no windows, so we used to joke that everyone was sluggish because there was no natural light coming in. But I think there is even some scientific evidence that sunlight does improve mood, because of vitamin D. When you drive down a dark road, sometimes the drive can be pretty scary because your vision is limited, and you have no idea what plants or animals are around you on the side of the road – but when it is day time, you can enjoy all the splendor of the road trip – you can see the trees, the deer, the antelope. Even by simple observances, we know that light elevates life.

This light truly brings life and it truly brings joy. Look at v.3, “You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.” What do you see here? Victory and joy! God has enlarged the nation – the nation that was once taken away into captivity, has now been restored, and what’s more, enlarged, and the people rejoice. We see a harvest! Those in the darkness were distressed and hungry and roamed through the land until they were famished – but those in the light have a harvest! What’s more, there is rejoicing as warriors rejoice when dividing plunder. It’s rejoicing as though we’ve received great treasures!

This victory is compared to Midian’s defeat in v.4. Midian was a nation that was so powerful and oppressive to Israel, that the Israelites hid in caves to avoid them. The Midianites randomly would come in to ruin their crops and kill their animals, leaving not one living thing for them. So the Lord raised up a mighty judge, Gideon, and with the Lord’s help he killed 120,000 Midianites with just 300 men. Why is the victory over Midian mentioned here? For the Israelites, it evoked *a great victory won by the Lord, and not on their own strength*. It was the Lord that shattered the yoke that burdened them, the bar across their shoulder, the rod of their oppressor. It is the Lord who sets us free from the oppression of sin and darkness. It is the Lord who can win a great victory for us. And when the enemy has been defeated, the Lord will usher in an eternal period of peace: “Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for the burning, fuel for the fire.” Though we see many wars all over the world today, when the Lord comes again all wars will cease.

The light that has revealed to us all these things happens to be a person. Can we all read v.6, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” In the center of this great light, the center of the rising sun of dawn was the son who was given – the son who would enlarge the nation, defeat the enemy and shatter the yoke that burdens us. *This child born to us was God’s one and only Son, Jesus Christ*, who said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Isaiah prophesied 700 years before he came that he would come to save us. He came to Galilee, where he started his ministry, as foretold in v.1. Remember in v.1 God humbled the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, but will honor Galilee of the nation (or Galilee of the Gentiles). Zebulun and Naphtali were the names of the Israelite tribes and territories – but Galilee was in the same

region. This means the promise here is not just for the Israelites, but also for all nations – Galilee of the nations. Notice here as well, that he humbled his people before they received honor – and sometimes it’s the same way with us – sometimes we need to be humbled before receiving honor from the Lord.

Jesus Christ brought us peace with God by dying for our sins on the cross. That is why we call him our Lord and Savior. We could not pay the price for our sin because we are sinners – but Jesus Christ was sinless, and gave his life so that he could pay for our sin and grant us his righteousness. *And he won the victory by his resurrection from the grave*, utterly defeating the power of sin and death. Now he lives forever to make intercession, to pray for us before God (Heb 7:25).

The government will be on his shoulders – he will be the king of the new kingdom. And he is our Wonderful Counselor – because he knows the will and the laws of God. He is our Mighty God – because Jesus was the Son of God who crushed and defeated all of our enemies, and he is worthy of our worship and praise. He is our Everlasting Father – for he is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2). Through him we receive everlasting life. And he is our Prince of Peace, because he is the one who made peace between us and God, reconciling us to God. Through Jesus Christ, we are reconciled to God! Through Jesus, be reconciled to God!

Truly, a people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. This was the great hope that Isaiah wrote about to the Israelites, and Jesus came to fulfill Scripture in his first advent. The hope of Isaiah was realized, but what does that mean for our hope?

Part III: The Zeal of the Lord Almighty

Again, so the hope of Isaiah was realized, now what does that mean for our hope? *That means our hope can be even greater, even more sure.* When Jesus first came, even his cousin John the Baptist had some doubts. When John was in prison, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” But now we know for sure, Jesus is the light, he is the child that was born to us who would be our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. That means God’s word is true, his promises are true, and he will do everything he says. Look at v. 7: “Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

Zeal means an intense eagerness. Zeal means the Lord really wants to do it. It means he desires it – Jesus’ glory, and our salvation. He wants to save us, he wants to do it, he will do it! And he has done it, through Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection. The Lord has zeal to establish His Son, Jesus Christ as Lord of Lords and King of Kings – seated on David’s throne. That is, he is King over the people of God. Is Christ your King? He ought to be, if you are a child of God. When Christ was here on earth, he had a core group of 12 disciples, one of which betrayed him. But since his resurrection, thousands were being added to the number of “Christians” by the power of the Holy Spirit, and Christianity has conquered kingdoms – taken

over the Roman Empire, established in Europe, Africa, Asia, was foundational to the founding of the United States, and is being spread through China, India and Iran – and that’s not the end of the list! Of the increase of his government and his peace there will be no end. And he has established light and peace in our hearts, by giving us the Holy Spirit, God himself – also as a deposit and a guarantee of our coming salvation.

We need the Holy Spirit – as Dr. John Armstrong told us last week, *the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and transforms our hearts* – the Holy Spirit makes us ministers of the new covenant, transforming us and conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ. Some people might wonder, when Jesus won the victory through his death on the cross, why didn’t he stay, why didn’t he establish his kingdom then? Why did he become lifted up into heaven? There are many reasons – one is to sit at the right hand of God and pray for us. Mark 13:10 says, “And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.” When Christ comes again, judgment will begin and the righteous separated from the wicked – but now is the time of grace, now is the time to preach the gospel for the salvation of sinners. Christ is living, active and working through us. Isaiah said a light has dawned – and indeed it has through Christ. The light has dawned in our lives, yet many still live in darkness. *We must shine the light of Christ through the preaching of the gospel*, that the light may dawn in the lives of others and the government and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ will increase throughout all the earth.

We are seeing the darkness of the world – with all of its wars, corrupt politicians and world leaders – but Christ’s kingdom will be established with justice and righteousness – it is in heaven, and it will be when he sets up his kingdom on earth. Because Jesus came once, he will come again to fulfill everything else that is written in the Scripture. *When he comes again, he will establish a new heavens and a new earth*. Rev 21:4 says, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” No more death. No more pain. Everlasting light, and everlasting life. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. What is your hope this Christmas as you think about the first coming of Christ? My hope is actually in having a greater hope for the Lord! O Lord for a greater faith! *For a greater hope!* Lord let your light shine in me! Let the zeal of the Lord be your zeal to see the increase of his kingdom and his peace to all men! Put your hope in the Lord, that you may sing, “My life is in you Lord, my *hope* is in your Lord, my strength is in you Lord, it’s in you, it’s in you!”