

## **“The Great Light of Christmas”**

**Isaiah 9:1-7**

**December 20, 2020**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

As we all know, lights are a prominent feature of our celebration of Christmas. We use lights to decorate our houses and our Christmas trees, and most neighborhoods have at least one house where the owner goes all out with his Christmas lights. Our neighborhood has just such a house that lies on the normal walking path Wendy and I take through the neighborhood. It seems that every place where a light could possibly be placed has received one, in addition to places you wouldn't normally think to put lights. Even the back of his house, which faces the lake, has not been left out of his Christmas illumination efforts. We celebrate the Sundays of Advent with the lighting of the Advent Wreath. We have a Christmas Eve candle-lighting service. And we do all this right after the winter solstice, when darkness is the longest of the entire year.

The Bible makes extensive use of these themes of light and darkness to speak of God's work in the world. There are about two hundred references to darkness in the Bible. The very first act of God at creation concerned light and darkness. **“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light”** (Gen. 1:3). Darkness is always a negative image in the Bible. It refers to ignorance of God, to spiritual blindness, to death, to hopelessness and to evil. It is a common description in the New Testament of hell itself, with such verses as Matthew 25:30. **“And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** Such darkness speaks of the horrors of solitary confinement, for utter darkness cuts you off from others.

Many would describe 2020 as a year of darkness, and not without good reason. It has been a hard year. We've had a global pandemic, massive job losses, quarantines, business and school closings, racial tension, and political division in the nation. Each of these trials has brought challenges to the Church that are so severe that many are predicting the closing of large numbers of churches in the wake of these troubles. Today's passage begins with a word of great encouragement for dark times. **“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”** (v. 2). Is it possible that the darkness itself helps us see the light of Jesus? Is it possible that 2020, with all its darkness, could turn out to be a year uniquely suited to help us see Jesus more clearly and love him more deeply? Perhaps this Christmas may turn out to be a special gift from God not in spite of the travails of 2020, but because of them. Jesus is the great light we see in the darkness. He is the one who pushes back the darkness in each of our lives. Let's look at Isaiah's depiction of this great light of Jesus.

## I. The Benefits of this Great Light

The context of this glorious chapter about the great light of Jesus is a time of utter darkness for God's people. Isaiah was writing to the southern kingdom of Judah after the nation of Israel had been divided into a southern and northern kingdom. Judah was facing two major threats. The first was an attack by a coalition army of the northern tribes of Israel and of Syria, nations far more powerful than Judah. It would be like America and Canada coming together to invade Mexico. The king of Judah was an evil king named Ahaz. He knew his nation was in trouble. God had revealed what Israel was to do when they faced forces too powerful for them. They were to call out to their Lord for deliverance, just as the great King David had done when he faced down the mighty warrior, Goliath. 2 Kings tells what Ahaz did instead. **“So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel [the northern tribes were called by the name *Israel*], who are attacking me. Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Kir, and he killed Rezin [the king of Syria]” (16:7-9).**

Ironically, Judah's second threat was their deliverer against the first threat of Syria and Israel. Assyria ended up invading both Syria and the northern nation of Israel. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali that are mentioned in verse 1 are two of the tribes taken captive by Assyria. Now Assyria is threatening Judah too. The previous chapter speaks of the Assyrian threat as a great flood that is covering this entire region. He says that it will reach **“even to the neck of Judah”** (8:8). We would say that we “have just one nostril above the water line.”

To walk in darkness, then, is to trust in a deliverer who ends up betraying you at a later time. We trust in the wrong deliverer and then get hurt by that deliverer. This is the story of the sin nature possessed by us all. We look to something or someone other than God for rescue and salvation. But the object of our trust will always let us down and eventually betray us. Someone looks to a career for their salvation and then gets betrayed by that job when he is discarded in the form of a layoff. Someone else looks to a marriage partner, only to discover after the marriage that this spouse cannot save. Like Ahaz looking to Assyria, the object of trust may work for a while but then betrays. To walk in darkness is to trust the things that cannot deliver, and then to fall into hopelessness when they let us down.

God comes to those who have fallen by this misguided trust and pushes back the darkness in their lives. Verses 3-5 describe what this light brings to them. It brings joy. **“You have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.”** In both of these

metaphors, the harvest and the battle, the joy comes after anxiety and multiplied threats. The growing season poses many threats to the farmer, including such things as drought, pestilence and catastrophic weather events. On top of all that, in subsistence cultures like this one, crop failure could lead to starvation and death. The spoils of battle come after the threat of the enemy. When battles in this day did not go well, the result was death for the soldiers and poverty and enslavement for the survivors. Yet God has brought them through these threats and given them both plenty and victory. God will do the same for us. He will bring us through 2020 and into the joy of his provision for us.

This great light also brings deliverance from oppression and bondage. **“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”** (v. 4). The reference to Midian reminds us of the story of Gideon. By God’s power alone, Gideon defeated the Midianites by his non-army army. Whoever heard of preparing for war through a reverse draft? Instead of calling up soldiers to fight, he busied himself sending home the soldiers who were ready to fight. Then he went to fight the Midianites with an army of only three-hundred soldiers. In this way, God made it clear that the deliverance was his doing. That’s the way it is with us too. Our enemies have been defeated not by us, but by our Lord Jesus.

This great light brings next the benefit of the end of all warfare. **“For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire”** (v. 5). What a deliverance this is! It is not just deliverance from an enemy in one battle, but the end of all warfare. This is like saying, “Send home all the soldiers and sell their weapons, because we won’t be needing them anymore.” The great light brings permanent peace.

## II. The Identification of this Great Light

Verse 6 makes it clear who this great light is. **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.”** Note the significance of that phrase that is often overlooked. *“To us a child is born, to us a son is given.”* There are other fallen beings in creation, hosts of fallen angels who have been given no redeemer. No rescue is possible for them, resulting in God’s judgment upon them in the form of being locked **“in eternal chains under gloomy darkness”** (Jude 1:6). But for the sons and daughters of Eve, a child is given. It is this child who is the great light. This child, of course, is our redeemer, the Lord Jesus. Isaiah says that this son is *given*, the greatest gift of all.

The son is such a gift because **“the government shall be upon his shoulders.”** The shoulders are where we carry especially heavy burdens, and the government of the world is indeed a heavy burden. I think of Moses’ complaint of his inability to carry the burden of governing just one nation, saying, **“the burden is too heavy for me”** (Num. 11:14). But there is one able to shoulder this

burden, and it is our Lord Jesus. We often refer to Jesus as a “servant-leader,” and indeed he is. But I think we sometimes give emphasis to the wrong part of that, the servant part. We delight in seeing the humble, servant heart of Jesus, as we should. But the word that should be given emphasis is the word “leader.” Jesus is first of all a leader, able to shoulder the government of the world. It is true that he does so as a servant, but the primary thing he does is to lead.

Four names are given him in his leadership, in his governing role. He is called **“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”** Jesus is a wonder of a counselor. The counseling role that belongs to Jesus is somewhat different from our contemporary idea of a counselor. Counselors are taught today that their role is primarily one of listening and helping the counselee, through skillful questions, to come to their own conclusions about what needs doing. That’s not wrong, but what if there were a counselor who was infinitely wise, one who could see all of reality and whose counsel was always perfect? And what if this counselor were able not only to give perfect and wise advice in every situation, but also was able to empower the counselee to take the advice? It is often the case that counselors are able to see clearly what the counselee needs to do, but the counselee is the one who must find the motivation to do it. Jesus is a counselor unmatched by all other counselors because he can both give perfect advice and change the heart to be motivated to take the advice. He is able to do this because he is not only a wonderful counselor but also a “Mighty God.”

It is said of Jesus next that he is our “Everlasting Father.” This doesn’t mean that there is no distinction between the Father and the Son, as if God is not trinitarian. What is in view is simply that Jesus is fully God. In this context it is a relational word, meaning that Jesus loves with the love of a father. And it is everlasting, meaning that it will never change. So Jesus is our great light, able to govern his people, because he is a wonderful counselor able to advise his people with perfect wisdom and able to change their hearts because he is God. And he does all this with a heart of love.

### **III. The Goal of this Great Light**

The last name of Jesus in verse 6, and all of verse 7, tell us what Jesus’ goal is. He is the Prince of Peace. **“Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.”** Jesus comes that we might have peace. Notice that peace comes from an increase of his government. That means that the path to peace in your life is through an increasing submission to the government of Jesus. If you lack peace, it is because you are trying to shoulder a burden you were not meant to carry. Jesus was meant to shoulder the burden of governing your life. Peace comes as we learn to give up control and rest instead in Jesus’ control.

Peace with God comes as we learn to give up control of trying to save ourselves and let Jesus be our Savior. The experience of peace comes as we learn to rest in Jesus' control of our circumstances. It is as we give control of the things we were never able to control in the first place that we enter into his peace. When the times are dark, our sinful tendency is to revert to self-trust. But that will only lead to greater darkness. The light of God has come through Jesus. He will rule with justice and righteousness forevermore.

The text says that there will be no end to the increase of his government. That means also that our peace will never stop increasing through all eternity. We will grow ever more confident in the wise rule of Jesus.

### **CONCLUSION:**

I read several years ago an amazing account of a blind man who wanted to participate in downhill skiing. How could you do that as a blind man? He did it by securing a guide who would ski beside him and be his eyes. The guide, as it were, is his light in a completely dark world. I would imagine that a very close relationship would develop between the blind skier and his guide. The blind man would certainly listen carefully to every single word of direction from his guide. He would also have to trust his guide completely. Perhaps 2020 has served to show us all that we are just like that blind skier, hurtling downhill in complete darkness and headed toward certain catastrophe. We need a great light to illumine our way, and we have just such a light in Jesus.

I heard an interview this week with Tim Keller, who was diagnosed several months ago with pancreatic cancer. There is no cure for this cancer, and eighty percent of those who suffer with it die within a year. In the interview, Tim Keller said that he has frequently told people that you will not know that God is enough for you until God is all you have. Now, he said, he has experienced that reality. He reported that now his greatest fear is not of dying, but of going back to his condition before his cancer diagnosis, when he lacked this deep experience of the joy Jesus brings in the darkest moments of life. May that be our experience in the dark days of 2020!