

## For Unto Us

Isaiah was a towering prophetic figure from the later half of the eighth century before the birth of Jesus. He spoke his prophecies during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, which lasted from 736 - 697 (39 years). This was a period of history dominated by the Assyrians. It was in the year 722 that Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, Israel, fell to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V and the people were deported to lands to the north and east. And in 701 the Assyrian king Sennacherib forced Judah to pay massive tribute after destroying most of the cities of Judah. You can imagine what it might have been like to be living in Jerusalem at that time. Fear was everywhere; hope had failed.

The first areas of Israel to fall to the Assyrians were the lands belonging to the tribe of Naphtali, which was the western shore of the Sea of Galilee and north from there, and the tribe of Zebulun which was next, lying to the west and south-west of Naphtali, midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean. The people were deported, sent away to live elsewhere, and these two areas, along with Gilead across the Jordan, became three provinces of Assyria. These were dark days indeed, and Isaiah captures the mood of the times in these verses from the end of chapter 8:

*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. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. (Isaiah 8:21,22)*

Notice the emphasis on darkness in this passage. The prophet uses three different words in these two verses and they are translated “darkness”, “gloom” and worse. They suggest distress, anguished gloom, obscurity that comes from a thick blackness, and a sense of calamity.

The people enduring this horrible time will be angry at God that things are so bad, but when they turn from Him and look again at their surroundings they see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom. This is not just a morally dark or politically dark season; it is a desperate time, with fear engulfing the thoughts and the emotions of an entire population. I could imagine words like Isaiah’s being written to describe the mindset of Christian villages in northern Iraq as they hear story after story of what ISIS radicals have done to other believers in other villages. The people of Galilee, of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, have heard the reports of all that the Assyrians had done to the people of Damascus and now they are here, killing, stealing and destroying what they don’t steal. And Isaiah, who is living in these times, is describing both what they are now experiencing and he is also looking ahead to a time they can only dream about:

*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 Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan --  
The people walking in darkness have seen a great light  
On those living in the land of the shadow of death  
A light has dawned (9:1,2)*

Again, Isaiah uses the same words for darkness that he used in the previous verses, but this time the word is “No more!” “No more gloom for those who were in distress”, and “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.”

What Isaiah is speaking here is hope, that current distress will not be permanent, that there is good news on the way, that the darkness will pass. The contrast is powerful and that was Isaiah’s intention. Darkness and fearful gloom are replaced by a light that breaks in, that shatters the fears, so that the people who were walking in darkness, which means they were “living through this distressing, hopeless time”, will have seen a great light!

This light signifies a change in fortunes, a dramatic new order of things that will bring them joy and relief from all their sufferings, as the following verses indicate:

*You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy  
They rejoice before You as people rejoice at the harvest  
As men rejoice when dividing the plunder  
For as in the day of Midian’s defeat  
You have shattered the yoke that burdens them  
The bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor  
Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood  
Will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire (9:3-5)*

This is a complete reversal of the scene described at the end of chapter 8. Instead of words like ‘gloom’ and ‘distress’ and ‘calamity’, we read the word ‘rejoice’ in phrase after phrase. God has shattered the yoke that has been the horrible weight that Israel has had to bear and removed from them the oppression of their enemy.

What could the prophet possibly be talking about? What period in the history of Naphtali and Zebulun could he be describing? The people of those two tribes of Israel had been removed by the Assyrians, so what people is Isaiah writing about ... and writing to? Well, he’s writing to the people who were alive in the eighth century, the people who were struggling with the fear and distress caused by Assyria. He’s writing to give them hope, to remind them that God is able to turn the darkest periods of history around and bring joy and freedom in times when it seems impossible. That was what the prophets of the Old Testament did, over and over again. They pointed the people back to their God and to the hope that trusting Him can bring. That’s what Isaiah is doing here - telling them what God will do:

*He will honor Galilee of the Gentiles . . .  
You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy . . .* (notice that Isaiah speaks in the past tense - he’s so sure that God will act in this way that he refers to it as already done)  
*You have shattered the yoke that burdens them*

This is the prophetic message, again and again in crisis after crisis - “Look to God and be filled with hope and expectation.” The next verses tell us Isaiah’s specific reason for hope:

*For to us a child is born; to us a Son is given  
And the government will be upon His shoulders  
And He will be called: Wonderful Counselor,  
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace  
Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end  
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom  
Establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness  
From that time on and forever  
The zeal of Yahweh Almighty will accomplish this  
(9:6,7)*

In the context, the first line of thinking would probably be that a son of David is born to us, a son through whom God's promises to David would be fulfilled. David's son Solomon came to the throne with a gift of great wisdom, with peace on every side and with the wealth of nations flowing into Israel. He didn't make the best use of what he had inherited and, since that day, Israel had been looking for a king like David, a king who could lead the nation like David had, a king who would bring the blessing of God to the people of God.

This is what Isaiah was announcing: the promised son of David was coming, a son who would rule like David had, full of passion for God's glory, and the government, the rule over the people of God, would be upon His shoulders. But this is not just a son like the kings of Judah, all of whom were descended from King David. This is clearly a much different Son - this is God Himself come to rule. Notice the titles by which this son would be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. There is no mere human being, then or now, who can be called "Mighty God" or "Everlasting Father". And who could claim to be the Prince of Peace or ask to be called "wonderful counselor"? This is the exciting promise of Isaiah, that God would come, that He would come out of the family line of David, that He would rule His people - "of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end" - and that He would reign in justice and righteousness.

The question has to be asked: to whom was Isaiah referring? Was this child ever born? Did He come as God's presence and with God's authority? Did He break up the darkness and bring light into the world? And the answer would have to be, for many of the people who lived during the time of Jesus and since: "Yes, He came, but it wasn't like we thought it was going to be. He brought peace, but it wasn't political peace, the end of war between nations. It was peace with God, peace on the inside, peace that passes all understanding. And He didn't sit on David's throne like a king that leads a political kingdom. More, He reminded us of David's heart desire that God would receive the praise of the nations and that they would join with Abraham's children in giving glory to Him. And, there is still an oppressor doing damage to the Jews, but now it's Rome instead of Assyria. But I have to say that He did shatter the yoke that burdens us, the bar across our shoulders, the rod of our oppressor. He taught us to be free on the inside, to not love our lives so much that we won't trust them to God, and to actually look forward to the eternal home He was preparing for us in His Father's house."

That's typical of the prophets of old; they spoke truth, but in words we could easily misunderstand. We think we know how to interpret a prophecy, but then we find that it speaks in deeper layers of meaning and in ways that we hadn't thought of.

How did this word from Isaiah help the people of Judah, who were trembling in fear at the approach of the kings of Assyria? Did he forget to tell them that the child that would be born to them was still over 700 years distant? The timing was not for them, but the prophetic word was for them. In Isaiah's prophecy, he told them that God had not forgotten them, that He had not forgotten His great promises to David, that He was going to act in a decisive way that would turn everything around, set the world upside down. This prophecy is a word of Yahweh, a word given to inspire hope, to get people to believe again, to pray again, to look patiently to God again, even in the midst of their struggles and fears. That's what prophets did; they reminded people that God was still in His heaven and that He was the One they should be turning to for help. Kings and commoners kept forgetting that central truth in the life of faith, and God kept sending His prophets to call them back again.

Here we are, over 2700 years removed both from the time of Assyrian conquest and from the prophecies of Isaiah, but still they speak a word to us that is vital for our spiritual health.

How is the world different from what it was like then? We have lived for nearly 2000 years under the light of the Son who was given and that has changed so many things it's impossible to list them all. But still people all over the globe are looking for peace, are struggling with fear, are doubting themselves and God, and are trying to overcome the darkness around them by believing in lies that masquerade as real hope.

Will Donald Trump return us to the good old days of family values and economic prosperity? Will he save America from the greed of the powerful elites? Will Justin Trudeau's spending spur the Canadian economy in the face of declining prices for oil and other raw materials? Will getting the right people on the Supreme Court in either country change the heart values of the ordinary person on the street? "No" to all of the above, because the politicians and judges of this world are not the real power, nor do they have the motivation to do what's honoring to God.

The real power is unseen. I remember many years ago reading a quote from someone in the US - I think it was Mark Hatfield, the long time Senator from Oregon - who said that you go, at least in his case, to Washington with the intention of doing good, of making positive change, but you are confronted with a power there that you can't get at, can't even identify, but it is dark and controlling and frustrates your good intentions at every turn. In my limited reading and observations about what happens in government, that's the most accurate and revealing description that I've come across. There really are powers of darkness and they really do control those who seek power in this world. And there really are threats out there to our safety and security. If we look to politicians or judges or government services to protect us, too often we'll find that they have their own agenda.

But, the message of Isaiah 9 is that there is a greater source of hope and encouragement, a more sure way of changing the course of a nation or the fate of its people -- and that is through an act of God. There was never much hope for Galilee of the Gentiles after the Assyrians moved the Israelites and resettled them in far off places. There was never much hope for them as Assyrians were replaced by Alexander's Greek armies and later by Roman legions. There was a little flurry of independence that lasted for decades, but even those were desperate times. No, the real hope for the land of Naphtali and Zebulun was to come from their village of Nazareth, from the home of Joseph and Mary, where they raised the Son of God, taking him to synagogue services, reading Torah to him, traveling to Jerusalem as a family to take part in the festivals of the Jews. In that home, the light of the world grew up and from this far-flung and forgotten corner of the world,

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light  
On those living in the land of the shadow of death; a light has dawned.*

And that light has spread for 20 centuries, exposing darkness, revealing the way of love to hundreds of millions of people, changing hearts and destinies along the way.

So what do we learn from Isaiah's prophecy, "Unto us a child is born"?

1. Maybe the first thing is that the darkness around us is real, but it's not ultimate. Darkness is dispelled where light shines and so we need not be depressed by the darkness that surrounds us. Instead of giving in to fear or confusion or doubt, we expose our minds to the truth contained in the Bible, to learn what it says to our times, to our world view, and then allow that light to inform us, to change our thinking, and to inspire the way we talk about life and the questions about why things are the way they are when we're in conversations that matter with the people in our lives.
2. The second lesson from Isaiah's prophecy is that God is always working. His time frame doesn't always match ours; He doesn't always act as quickly as we would like, but He is at work. This whole realm of how His timing works is a huge mystery that we will never fathom in this life, but to know that He knows, that He cares, that He is at work while Christians are being targeted in Pakistan or Iraq or Nigeria or wherever, gives us hope to face our own challenges. God is not silent; He has not removed Himself from the stage of human activity. Rather, He has come down to this earth and made it His home, lived and suffered and revealed Himself and bore our sins, all on this earth and within a community of people.

*For unto us a child is born; to us a Son is given  
And the government will be upon His shoulders  
And He will be called 'Wonderful Counselor',  
'Mighty God', 'Everlasting Father', 'Prince of Peace' ...  
The zeal of Yahweh Almighty will accomplish this*

The passion of God, His fervent compassion and love for us, will sustain us, rescue us, preserve and protect us, through everything that comes against us. He is with us in love and faithfulness and we can find both rest and hope, in Him.