

Isaiah 9:1-7; Matthew 4:12-17
The Dawn after Darkness
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

Some of the wording found in our text for today is quite well known, even among many who are otherwise not that familiar with Bible passages and Biblical language. The reason for this is that two of the verses in today's text are quoted in Handel's **Messiah**, the popular oratorio performed every Christmas season. Handel's **Messiah** has three major parts. Around the middle of the first part, there is a bass air which puts the words of Isaiah 9:2 to music:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light;
and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death,
upon them hath the light shined.

Then immediately following that is a chorus which cites the words of Isaiah 9:6:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the
government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall
be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the
Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

We will be looking at these verses today in their historical and literary context today. Hopefully the next time you hear Handel's **Messiah** and hear these two verses set to this

magnificent music, their message will resonate with you even more clearly and forcefully.

We will look at today's text using three headings: the darkness, the dawn and the deliverer.

First, **the darkness**. Our text for today mentions a specific geographic region in Palestine and refers to it as the land of the shadow of death where the people walked in darkness. This region included the territory belonging to two of the tribes of Israel, Zebulun and Naphtali. This tribal territory was in the far north of Palestine, to the west and northwest of the Sea of Galilee. A road called "the way of the sea" passed through this region. This road was a major highway going all the way from Damascus to the north down to Egypt to the south. This highway passed near the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. In the time of Jesus, this road passed by the city of Capernaum, the city on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus made his headquarters during much of His Galilean ministry. This region also included some territory to the east of the Jordan River. And this region included the area called Galilee of the Gentiles, or, more literally, "the circle of the nations." The "circle of the nations" was then a reference to the very northern border of Palestine, an area where many had intermarried with Gentiles. The reference overall is to the northern portion of Palestine in the vicinity of what later became known as the Sea of Galilee.

Our text for today says that this was a place of intense darkness. This deep darkness is not literal; it is metaphorical, symbolizing hardship, difficulty and despair. This region, called in our text

“the land of the shadow of death,” was the part of Palestine first overrun by the violent and cruel Assyrian invaders. The Assyrians conquered this region and then depopulated it. They deported all the surviving people and resettled them in foreign lands.

Now this grim experience, which was then in the not too distant future, certainly justified the prophet’s dark description of this region. Such an invasion would certainly be a terrible catastrophe, a true nightmare ordeal. Yet the darkness of that military invasion was but the intensification of a darkness that was already there. Before the Assyrian invasion, this regions was already covered with a deep spiritual darkness. This spiritual darkness was the more substantial darkness, the more significant darkness.

The prophet described this spiritual darkness back in chapter eight. The people in this region had rejected the revealed word of the living and true God, and had substituted for this the religious practices of the pagan peoples which they bordered. These people, living nearer the pagan nations to the north, were more easily corrupted by their pagan ways.

Isaiah 8:19-20

- 19 And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?
- 20 To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

This spiritual darkness was the root darkness, the deeper darkness, and the real cause of all the subsequent hardship and difficulty.

I want to spend a little time today discussing what is meant by spiritual darkness. This is an area where we have to be careful because, as Isaiah said, there are those who call evil good, and good evil; there are those who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; there are those who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter (Isaiah 5:20). And the apostle Paul warned us that Satan, the lord of darkness, can make himself appear as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). So what is spiritual darkness and how do we truly identify it?

Darkness, of course, is the absence of light. In Scripture, light is a metaphor for our relationship with the living and true God. Light is essential for life. Without light, our physical world would be a frozen planet totally devoid of life. Light is also essential for perception. Without light, we cannot see, and sight is our primary means of knowing the world about us. Take away light, and the result is first ignorance and then ultimately death itself.

When God created the world in the space of six days, His activity on the first day was to create light. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God created the universe to reflect His glory, and God created light as a metaphor for Himself as the absolute prerequisite for life and knowledge. To walk in God's light is to know God's truth. God reveals to us what is

true and what is false, what is good and what is evil. God alone has the right to make these foundational definitions because God is unique. Defining reality is God's prerogative simply because of who God is as the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. As mere creatures, limited and dependent, our responsibility is to submit to this light, to accept God's definitions of truth and morality as our only infallible rule, as our only ultimate measure of reality.

Psalm 119:105

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Psalm 119:130

130 The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

To walk in God's light is to know God's truth, and to walk in God's light is also to experience God's sustaining strength.

Psalm 27:1

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

God sustains us just as physical light sustains life in the physical realm. To walk in God's light is to depend upon God to uphold us and to protect us and to enable us. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. He is the strength of our life, and we know it and we accept it.

Now if that is what it means to walk in light, what does it mean to walk in darkness? To walk in darkness is first to reject God's in-scriptured revelation as found in the Bible and to look for some substitute foundational definition of what is true and what is right. Those who walk in darkness think they can find foundational truth by looking deep inside themselves mystically or by trying to reason their way to truth rationally or by examining the wonders of nature empirically. None of these is any substitute for the infallible revelation of foundational truth found in God's word, the Bible. Yes, we can use our thoughts and observations to build on God's foundational truth but not to lay a substitute foundation. God's word is the only **infallible** rule of faith and practice.

To walk in darkness is first to choose ignorance and secondly to choose death. To cut oneself off from God is to cut oneself off from life because God is the source of life and the sustainer of life. The one who walks in darkness assumes that he can successfully live life without God's help. To walk in darkness is to think it is safe to reject God as the source of truth because one does not need God as the sustainer of life.

This sort of thinking is the very temptation Satan, the lord of darkness, put before Eve in the garden of Eden. Satan told Eve in the garden that she could define good and evil for herself, she could disobey God's command, and she would get by with it. Satan told Eve that she could do what God forbid her to do and not die as God had warned. Satan told Eve that she could play with this fire and not get burned. That was Satan's promise to her, and she believed Satan and disbelieved God.

This sort of thinking is also what Isaiah was condemning in our text. The people had rejected the law and the testimony, which were God's infallible revelation of His truth. As a substitute for God's truth, they were seeking out mediums and wizards. They were looking to other religions not founded upon God's word but founded upon superstition at best and upon demonic power at worst.

When they rejected the living and true God as the source of truth, they also rejected the living and true God as the sustainer of life. They no longer wanted the living and true God, so God accommodated them. They rejected God, and so God in judgment withdrew His protecting hand from them. They were attracted to idolatrous religion, so God allowed an idolatrous nation to come upon them. Without God's protection, the Assyrians overwhelmed them, and their land became the dark land of the shadow of death.

We have looked at the darkness. Our second point is **the dawn**, the rising of the great light to displace the deep darkness.

The prophet tells us that the coming of light to this area would be an occasion of great joy. The light would be as glorious as the darkness had been deep. When first the Assyrians and later the Babylonians invaded Palestine and exiled the Jewish population, that looked like the end of Israel as a people and nation, but it wasn't. God allowed the pagan beast to devour His people, but God did not allow the pagan beast to digest them and to assimilate them. During this time of exile in a pagan land filled with idol worship, God blessed His exiled people with

spiritual revival. While living in the belly of the beast, many within Israel rejected idol worship and returned to the worship of the living and true God. God then blessed them by enabling a remnant to return to their homeland in Palestine. Just as the great fish threw up Jonah on dry ground, the pagan empire allowed a multitude of Jews to return to the promised land. God began again to multiply and to enlarge His people. God began again to fulfill His promise to Abraham that his seed would eventually outnumber the stars in the sky and the dust of the earth. As it says in verse three of our text, “You have multiplied the nation.”

Now that return home from exile was just the beginning of the fulfillment of this prophecy about the rising of the great light. The principle fulfillment, the main fulfillment came later with the coming of Jesus Christ. The very area of Galilee which Isaiah had described as the land of the shadow of death was the location of much of Jesus’ earthly ministry. And Jesus is the One who truly began multiplying and expanding God’s people. Jesus, the prophesied great light in Galilee of the Gentiles, was also the Light of the world who brought the kingdom of God to the nations of the earth.

Isaiah 49:6

6 Indeed [God] says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'

Jesus multiplied God's people and enlarged God's nation by bringing Gentiles into it. In old testament times, God had largely abandoned the Gentile nations to spiritual darkness. Jesus defeated Satan at the cross and then began invading Satan's territory. Jesus sent His followers to disciple the nations of the world and to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. The people of God then became a multitude beyond numbering, a multitude from every nation, tribe and tongue. The dark pagan empire had once almost assimilated the people of God at the time of their exile. Now the people of God are assimilating the peoples of the world through the preaching of the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

In this age, Jesus has risen like the sun to bring light to a spiritually darkened world. This is a time of great joy. Our passage compares this joy to the joy of harvest when the crops are gathered from the field. Our passage compares this joy to the joy when Gideon and his three hundred warriors defeated the countless maurading hordes of the Midianites and then divided the spoil of victory. Our passage compares this joy to the joy of a military victory that is so complete that the conquering army can safely burn and destroy the military gear of their conquered enemies.

The prophesied dawning of the great light is the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile, followed by the coming of Jesus of Nazareth to that restored nation, followed by the spiritual conquest of the pagan nations through the preaching of gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our last point is **the Deliverer**. First, the darkness; second, the dawn; and third, the Deliverer. The Deliverer, of course, is Jesus, the Messianic King who replaces darkness with light, who replaces gloom with joy, who replaces defeat with victory.

The Messianic King prophesied here is the same Person prophesied back in Isaiah chapter seven: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.” The prophecy here in chapter nine gives us more names for the prophesied Messiah, names which tell us more about Him. Let’s look at these new names and see what they tell us about Jesus.

Our translation has five names, but I think it is best to remove one of the commas and to interpret these words as four names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

There is so much here that it is hard to know where to start. Let me begin by pointing out that the reigns first of David and then of Solomon were both prophetic pictures of the spiritual victory and reign of Jesus Christ. David was the warrior king who engaged in warfare and defeated the enemies of God’s people. David’s son Solomon reigned in the time of peace which followed. The name Solomon is related to the Hebrew word for peace, which is shalom. Solomon began His reign of peace by asking God for wisdom, and God granted this request and made Solomon the wisest man on earth. Solomon was the peace king known for his wise counsel. Solomon used his reign of peace to build God’s first temple in Jerusalem. Here is the point of all of

this. All of these events in the lives of David and Solomon pointed to Jesus. Jesus was the warrior king who overcame sin, Satan and the world. Jesus was the peace king who built His church, which is the new covenant temple of God made out of living stones.

With these thoughts before us about David and Solomon, let's look at these four names. The first two names are Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God. The word here translated "mighty" in Mighty God literally refers to a warrior hero. Another way to translate our first two names would then be Wonderful Counselor and Warrior Hero God. Here we have a reference to an exalted Solomon and an exalted David. The title Counselor points to Solomon, the wisest man on earth in his day, and the title Warrior Hero points to David, the slayer of Goliath. Now look at the last two names: Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. David was the father, and Solomon his son was the prince and the man of peace who built the temple. Jesus, the Messianic King, fulfills on an exalted plane and in a spiritual sense all that was good about the reigns of both King David and King Solomon.

Let's now quickly look at each of these four names one at a time. First, Wonderful Counselor. The word here translated "Wonderful" is once given as the divine name of the Angel of the Lord (Judges 13:18). This Counselor is one who is a Wonder in the sense that He surpasses human thought and ability. He has come to tell us heavenly things and to declare God to us with a new clarity. He is God's ultimate revelation of Himself because He is the brightness of God's glory and the express image of God's being.

The second name is Mighty God. This is a clear reference to the deity of Christ. This exact title is used in Isaiah 10:21 to refer to God Himself. Jesus is the Divine Warrior who defeated Satan. To win this victory, Jesus had to be both fully divine and fully human. Jesus defeated Satan by suffering and dying on the cross as a payment for the sins of all of God's people. By paying the penalty for their sins, He took away Satan's only legal claim upon them and won the right to translate His people from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. To pay this human penalty for human sins, Jesus had to be human. Yet to give this payment an infinite worth, Jesus had to be divine. Because of the infinite worth of His atoning work, Jesus is able to save a multitude of people beyond numbering, a multitude of people from every nation, tribe and tongue. Jesus is the Mighty God, the Divine Warrior.

The third name is Everlasting Father. This name is not referring to God the Father within the triune community of the Godhead. This name is referring not to Jesus' relationship to the Godhead but to Jesus' relationship to His people. Jesus functions as a father to His people because He gives them life and then cares for them as a father cares for his children. And His fatherhood is not temporary. Jesus is to His people an Everlasting Father. He gives them eternal life, and they shall never perish.

The fourth and last name is Prince of Peace. Through His saving work, Jesus has made us to be at peace with God. Jesus has made God at peace with us by paying for our sins, by satisfying the just claims of God's law against us as sinners and law

breakers and transgressors. Jesus has made us at peace with God by removing that old heart that was filled with rebellion against God and His law and by replacing it with a new heart with God's law written upon it, a new heart that wants to please God, a new heart whose main desire and aspiration in life is submission to the will of the Father.

Jesus finished all the work that is implied by these four prophetic names. After His death and resurrection, Jesus ascended up into heaven where God seated the glorified Jesus at His right hand, the place of all authority. Jesus, the second Adam, is now the Sovereign of the universe. Jesus, the second Adam, is now the One with all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus, the second Adam, is now the Ruler of that one eternal kingdom which will never fall.

Let me close by exhorting you to put your faith in Jesus and His saving work. By looking to Jesus, by resting upon Jesus alone, by depending upon Him and His work, you can be delivered from the kingdom of darkness, which is the place of spiritual ignorance and spiritual death. You can be translated into the kingdom of light, which is the place of spiritual truth and spiritual life. Jesus truly is the Light of the world. Leave the darkness and come to the Light. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12).