

Isaiah 9:8-10:4  
The Darkness before Dawn  
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Our sermon last week on the preceding verses was entitled “The Dawn after Darkness.” Our sermon for today is entitled “The Darkness before Dawn.” The two sermons are somewhat related but have different emphases. The emphasis last week was on the dawn. The emphasis this week will be on the darkness. Let me begin today by reminding you what in this context is the darkness and what in this context is the dawn.

The darkness was a period of judgment upon God’s people in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. God’s instrument of judgment was the rising world empire to the north, the Assyrians. The Assyrians totally conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and forcibly removed most of its surviving population and resettled them among other nations of the world. The Assyrians also later attacked the southern kingdom of Judah and overran most of that nation but not the capital city of Jerusalem. God answered the prayers of good king Hezekiah and delivered Judah from the Assyrians. The Babylonians then overthrew the Assyrians, and the Babylonian empire, over a century later, finished what the Assyrians had started in Judah. The Babylonians conquered Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the temple built by Solomon, and resettled most of the people in foreign lands for a seventy year period called the Babylonian exile. This

series of events, which began during the ministry of Isaiah, was the coming darkness Isaiah was referring to in his prophecy.

The coming light Isaiah spoke about was a then coming time of revival, reformation and deliverance. During the Babylonian exile when the Jews were living in a culture dominated by idol worship and superstition, many Jews returned to the worship of the living and true God. After the fall of the Babylonian empire and the rise of the Medo-Persian empire, God moved the Medo-Persian king, King Cyrus, to allow a remnant of the Jews from all twelve tribes to return to Palestine in order to restore the nation of Israel and to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. The returning remnant rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. They also re-established the throne of David in a limited way in that Zerubbabel, a royal descendant of King David, became the governor of Jerusalem. That was the beginning of the prophesied dawning of light. More, much more was to come later. Over five centuries later, Jesus was born. The life and ministry of Jesus was the principal fulfillment of the dawning of a new day. His coming was the prophesied rising of the Sun of Righteousness with healing in its wings. The prophesied day of light continued with the discipling of the nations as Jesus rules from His heavenly throne at the right hand of God. In the future, these prophecies about a great light shining in darkness will find their perfect fulfillment when Jesus returns and completes the salvific application of His atoning work. At the second coming of Jesus, the saints will be resurrected and glorified and made perfect in holiness, and the earth will be cleansed of the curse and renewed and glorified.

In summary, 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, followed by the return of Christ at the end of the age.

In our passage for last Sunday, Isaiah had prophesied the coming of the great light:

Isaiah 9:2

- 2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.

And Isaiah prophesied the coming of Jesus Christ and His reign upon the throne of David:

Isaiah 9:6-7

- 6 For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- 7 Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Now that brings us to our passage for today. God gave Isaiah this message of hope about the coming great light, but first God's people must endure the time of deep darkness. When Isaiah ministered, the dark night of judgment was far from over. In fact, it was only beginning.

Isaiah knew that the dark night was coming because God had sent a dark word against Israel. This word which God sent against Jacob and which fell upon Israel was the word of prophecy about the coming Assyrian invasion. God had already said that He would bring the king of Assyria upon the southern kingdom of Judah, and that the king of Assyria would take away the spoil of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel.

As Isaiah would later so plainly state in Isaiah 55:11, when God sends forth a word from His mouth, it will not return to God void. It will accomplish the purpose for which God sent it. Here are some examples of this phenomenon. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Jesus said, "Lazarus, come forth," and dead Lazarus came forth from the grave. Jesus said to the Roman centurion regarding his servant who was sick unto death, "As you have believed, so let it be done for you," and the centurion's servant was healed that very hour. Jesus said regarding the fig tree which bore leaves but no fruit, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again," and immediately the fig tree withered away. The word of God, whether it is a word to heal or a word to destroy, is a living and powerful word, sharper than any two-edged sword. The word which God sent to Israel and Judah was that He would bring the king of Assyria upon them as

His agent of judgment, and this word fell upon Israel and Judah like a thunderbolt.

Our text says that God has sent His prophetic word of judgment against Jacob, and it has fallen upon Israel, and all the people will know it. They did not know that prophetic word of judgment in the sense of paying attention to it as a merciful word of warning. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed God's word to them, and they heard without understanding and saw without perceiving. If they had truly understood, if they had truly perceived, they would have repented of their sins and turned from their evil ways. If they had done that, their experience would have been like that of the Ninevites when Jonah had preached to them. Jonah had simply proclaimed, "Yet forty days, and Ninevah will be overthrown." The people of Ninevah repented in sack cloth and ashes and turned from their evil ways; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. That also would have been the experience of the people of Israel if they had known God's word as a means of grace, if they had responding to it in repentance.

Jeremiah 18:7-8

- 7 The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,
- 8 if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it.

The people of Israel heard Isaiah's prophetic word of warning, but they did not know it in the sense of heeding it; they did not know it in the sense of taking it seriously and paying attention to it; they did not know it in the sense of repenting of their sins and turning from their evil ways. So instead they would know the prophetic word in the sense of experiencing the fulfillment of its threats and suffering the affliction of its execution. They would know the outer pain of divine chastisement while still resisting the therapeutic inner pain of sorrow for their sins.

What follows are four descriptions of the outworking in history of this divine word of judgment. These four descriptions are clearly divided into stanzas by a refrain which follows each of them. The refrain is "For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still." We find this literary division at the end of verse 12, at the end of verse 17, at the end of verse 21, and at the end of verse 4 in chapter ten. The repeated message of this refrain is that the people had not yet responded to the divine chastisement in repentance and so God's hand was still stretched out against them. The chastisement and the dark night of judgment continued, and would continue until the people turned to the One who smote them and sought the Lord of hosts. The people were at this point still seeking their idols and still rebelling against from the living and true God.

Each of these four stanzas reveals something different about God's judgment and about the sinful obstinacy of the people. As we examine them one by one, we will learn that God's judgment is sovereign, sweeping, self-inflicted and suitable.

First, God's judgment is **sovereign**; verses 9-12. God's historical judgments had started to come upon Israel, and the prophet says that the northern ten tribes responded with a cocky confidence. They proclaimed that the destruction which God had brought upon them was but an opportunity for them to build bigger and greater cities. The buildings which were destroyed were made of brick, but they will rebuild with the costlier material of hewn stone. The trees which had been cut down were sycamore fig trees, but they will replace these with cedars, a tree whose wood is more valued. Like the legendary Phoenix, they will rise from the ashes in renewed glory. Like the Roman emperor Nero who fiddled while Rome burned, they will seize the tragic destruction as an opportunity to build a better city.

We have all heard of the power of positive thinking, but we must learn the difference between positive thinking and foolish presumption. I am reminded of the folly of Satan's words of temptation to Eve in the garden of Eden. Satan told Eve to think positively and to be optimistic even as she disobeyed God and ignored God's warnings. Satan told Eve, "Eat of the forbidden fruit and you will not die." That is not healthy positive thinking but the most foolish presumption.

I am reminded of the folly of the humanist poem "Invictus."

In the fell clutch of circumstance,  
I have not winced nor cried aloud:  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.  
It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.

What foolish and presumptuous words! God is the Master of my fate, and God is the Captain of my soul. Apart from God's help, I am no match for the larger circumstances of life which tower over me like mountains. Apart from God's help, I am no match for the march of history and the progression of events over which I have no control. How foolish to think otherwise!

The Ephraimites and the Samaritans also spoke foolish words when they said they would rebuild with hewn stone and replant cedar trees. How little they knew, and how shallow was their understanding! God, the Sovereign Lord, had other plans for them. The nation of Israel had formed an alliance with Rezin, king of Syria, to her northeast, but now the Assyrians have overrun and conquered Syria. So now Syria as a servant of Assyria was an enemy to the northeast. God would also raise up the Philistines as an enemy of Judah to the southwest. God in judgment had raised up enemies which, to use the words of the prophecy, would devour Israel with an open mouth. Our plans come to nothing when the living and true God opposes us, the God who resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Instead of concentrating on their blue prints, the Ephraimites and the Samaritans should have cried out with the psalmist,

Psalm 139:23-24

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties;

24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Whenever we are tempted to sin, we should remember that the Lord chastens whom He loves. That is the sobering reality, and we should remember it when Satan is tempting us with his glowing fantasies about the pleasure which sin will bring.

First, God's judgments are sovereign. Second, they are **sweeping**; verses 13-17. The prophet proclaimed that God's judgments would touch everyone. We have a tendency to think that calamity will come to others but not to us. The prophet warned that all would be affected when God brought the Assyrians against Israel as an invading force. God would cut off head and tail, palm tree and bulrush in one day.

The prophet then mentioned specifically the elders, the leaders which led the land into immorality and wickedness. God will certainly judge them. And God will also judge the false prophets who had flattered and encouraged these leaders in their wicked ways. A modern example of such a leader would be a politician who promotes laws which sanction and expedite sinful practices such as the deliberate killing of the unborn and homosexuality. A modern example of such a false prophet would be a preacher who praises such political leaders as champions of justice. Isaiah specifically mentioned these blind leaders of the blind as among those who will be caught in the web of judgment.

There were others who didn't seem so blameworthy. What about the young men who made up the army and who put their

lives on the line to defend the nation? And what about the helpless widow and orphan whom God usually champions? No, God's judgment would come upon them as well. The reason is that the sins of the nation had become so universal that they affected people of all classes and types. Practically everyone from the least to the greatest had become caught up in the evil and hypocrisy and folly which had so thoroughly infected their culture. The people had neglected the word of God which transforms by renewing the mind, and they had become conformed to the world in their thinking and attitudes and practices.

God's judgments are sovereign, sweeping and **self-inflicted**; verses 18-21. When God judges a nation for its wickedness, one of the greatest judgments is to simply give that nation over to that wickedness. God simply withdraws His restraining hand and allows the wickedness to grow like a spreading fire. God simply withdraws His restraining hand and allows people's rebellion against morality to become more consistent and thorough. In judgment, God gives people over to their lusts and to their debased minds. Thus the wickedness being judged becomes the judgment, for wickedness is self-destructive. As a society degenerates, wickedness spreads like a fire during a drought. First the briars and thorns of isolated individuals are destroyed by the fires of wickedness, and then the thickets of social institutions such as family and school and business are consumed as if by flames.

When people devote themselves to sinful living, they turn upon one another and against one another. They try to take advantage

of one another and to get ahead by putting others down. There is no sense of loving one's neighbor as oneself. In the long run, such conduct becomes self-destruction. People become like those who are seeking to nourish their own body by eating their own flesh, and everyone loses.

God's judgments are sovereign, sweeping, self-inflicted and **suitable**; chapter ten, verses 1-4. When sin took over Israel, the administrators of civil justice became increasingly corrupt. Those who were supposed to protect the weak and helpless began to prey on them and to take advantage of them. What will these corrupt civil magistrates do when God brings the Assyrians against their nation? Where are they to go for help when they become the weak and helpless before the Assyrians? They cannot go to God for help, for they have rejected God in their sins and they have refused to repent. Their judgment will be apt or suitable. Those who preyed on the weak and who robbed the helpless will themselves be weak and helpless in the day of judgment, and they will themselves be preyed upon and robbed. As they had done unto others, so it will be done unto them. When Assyria invades the land, their only options will be either to cringe among those taken captive or to fall among those slain by the sword.

God sent judgment after judgment on Israel, and still the people did not turn to God in repentance. In the time of judgment, the people demonstrated their presumptuous vanity, their pervasive vulgarity, their violent rivalry and their victim robbery. They responded to the judgment by hardening in their sinful attitudes and persisting in their sinful ways. The result was even more

and greater judgment. “For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still.”

But for the grace of God, there go we. Let me say that again: but for the grace of God, there go we. How grateful we should be that we have known the word of God as a means of grace. How grateful we should be that we have experienced the therapeutic inner pain of sorrow for our sins. How grateful we should be that God has taught us the joy of submitting to his law as a way of life. How grateful we should be that God has delivered us from the self-destructive insanity of sinful ways. How grateful we should be that God has sent us a Savior to earn our forgiveness and deliverance.

Isaiah 53:4-5

- 4 Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
- 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

How grateful we should be that Jesus has risen upon us as the Light of the world and has delivered us from the darkness of our sin and from the darkness of divine justice.