

Isaiah 9:1–7 — Unto Us a Child Is Born

The Great Light in Galilee, the Son Given, His Names, and His Everlasting Government

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:1–7

“Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea beyond Jordan in Galilee of the nations.

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

Thou hast multiplied the nation, and hast increased its joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.

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, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.”

The Structure of Chapters 6–9: A Parenthesis

Chapters 6 through 9:7 have a parenthetical character. Chapter 6 provides the setting — Isaiah’s vision of the holy throne, his cleansing, and his commission. Chapters 7 and 8 bring out the promise of Emmanuel against the dark backdrop of Ahaz’s unbelief and the threats of Syria and Ephraim. And the parenthesis closes in chapter 9:6–7 with the person of Emmanuel himself, reigning. A section that begins with Isaiah seeing the Lord sitting upon a throne ends with the Lord Jesus on the throne of David, his government and peace established forever. The whole section is framed by the glory of Christ.

The Great Light: Fulfilled in Galilee

Matthew 4:12–16 quotes verse 2 as having been fulfilled when the Lord Jesus came to Capernaum in the borders of Zebulun and Naphtali and began his ministry. That it might be fulfilled — those are Matthew’s words, and they are exact. This is fulfillment, not application. The people that walked in darkness saw a great light; those sitting in the region of the shadow of death, the light sprung up upon them.

Verse 1 describes the preceding affliction of the land of Zebulun and Naphtali as the context into which that light came. J.N. Darby’s translation conveys that the future darkness — what these chapters have been describing in the closing verses of chapter 8 — will be different from the affliction that preceded the first coming. Christ has come. That changes everything. For the godly remnant of Israel in the future, the fact that Christ has already come will make their darkness lighter — they will know him, wait for him, look for him. For the unbelieving nation of Israel, the rejection of the greater light will make their darkness the deeper. The greater the light that was presented and refused, the darker the darkness of refusal.

Verses 3–5 describe the joy and the deliverance that belong to the millennial setting — the nation multiplied and its joy increased, the yoke of burden broken, the rod of the oppressor removed, the weapons of war burned. There is a gap between verse 2 and verse 3 that the text does not mark but that the whole course of history has filled — the present age, the church, the setting aside of Israel as a nation. The prophet saw two mountain peaks: the first coming of Christ and his reign in glory. What lay in the valley between them — the parenthesis of the present age — was not shown. God so wrote the prophecies as to maintain the sense of expectancy for what was to come, even though he knew from the beginning what the interval would contain.

As in the Day of Midian

The comparison of verse 4 — “as in the day of Midian” — points to Gideon’s extraordinary deliverance in Judges 7. Three hundred men, torches hidden in pitchers, trumpets, the shattering of the pitchers, the sudden blaze of light and sound in the darkness of the Midianite camp — and the whole host ran, cried, and fled. The deliverance was sudden, surprising, accomplished by the direct hand of God rather than by the might of an army. This is the character of the Lord’s intervention at the end: he does not deal with all his enemies in one great simultaneous act but sequentially, according to the character of each. The beast and the false prophet are taken first; then the king of the north is broken without hand; then the drying up of the Euphrates opens the way for the kings of the east; and the Lord deals with Edom and others in turn.

Unto Us a Child Is Born; Unto Us a Son Is Given

The two clauses of verse 6 are not simply repetitions of each other. “A child is born” speaks of the incarnation — the coming into the world in flesh, in humility, the helpless infant in Bethlehem. “A son is given” speaks of something prior to the birth: the gift was given before it was received. A gift does not become a gift

when the package is unwrapped; it is a gift because the giver has given it. So the Son was given — given by the Father — and that testimony to his person as Son reaches back before the incarnation. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16). Sonship carries with it the connotation of dignity, in addition to the expression of relationship.

The government shall be upon his shoulder. When the Lord found the lost sheep, he put it on his shoulders. The same shoulders that bear the lost sheep bear the government of the whole earth. His capacity to sustain is the same whether it is one wandering lamb or the government of all the nations.

His Names

The names given to this child — Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace — are not separate names but a single compound name expressing his character and offices. Each phrase rewards meditation.

Wonderful: when the angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah and his wife before the birth of Samson, and they asked his name, he said, “Why do you ask after my name, seeing it is wonderful?” (Judges 13:18). That is the same divine person, the same answer. His name is wonderful because he is beyond all naming — the one who fills that name is greater than any description the name can contain.

The Mighty God: this is not a created being, not a subordinate deity, not an exalted man. These are the words used of Jehovah himself in the Old Testament. They establish beyond question that the child born and the son given is God himself in human form — the great assertion at the heart of the Christian faith.

The Everlasting Father: not that the Son is the Father in the Trinitarian sense, but that he is the father of the coming age, the one in whom the life and blessing of the millennial kingdom and all that lies beyond it have their source. He is the one

from whom all blessing flows.

The Prince of Peace: his reign brings peace — not the uneasy ceasefire of diplomacy but the real thing, established on the ground of righteousness. The effect of righteousness is peace (Isaiah 32:17). One of the prophets said the effect of righteousness is peace, and it goes contrary to the flesh, which would rather have peace without righteousness. His reign will have both together, perfectly.

The Zeal of the Lord of Hosts Will Perform This

The closing sentence of verse 7 is the hinge on which everything turns: “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.” Everything described in these verses — the increase of his government, the peace without end, the establishment of the throne of David with judgment and justice — is entirely dependent on him. Not on Israel’s repentance working its own way through, not on any human arrangement, not on the course of political history. The zeal of the Lord of hosts.

Israel will be brought to repentance — Zechariah 12 describes how they will look on him whom they have pierced, family by family, apart. But even that repentance is not something they will work up by themselves. God communicates faith and a new nature, and then the man repents. If repentance comes without a new nature, it is not repentance — it is the flesh attempting to reform itself, which it cannot do. The times of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:19); Peter preached that to Israel, putting them on their responsibility. But the performing of it is God’s, from first to last.

Isaiah’s long parenthesis, begun in chapter 6 with the vision of the holy throne and the commission of the prophet, ends here with the Lord Jesus on the throne of David forever. It started with him. It ends with him. That is entirely appropriate.

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of hosts will perform this.*