

## Isaiah 9:1-7

Epiphany 4, January 29, 2023  
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*Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed, As when at first He lightly esteemed The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, And afterward more heavily oppressed her, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, In Galilee of the Gentiles.*

*<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation And increased its joy; They rejoice before You According to the joy of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. <sup>4</sup> For You have broken the yoke of his burden And the staff of his shoulder, The rod of his oppressor, As in the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup> For every warrior's sandal from the noisy battle, And garments rolled in blood, Will be used for burning and fuel of fire. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

Just a little over a month ago was the shortest day of the year. That was the winter solstice on December 21<sup>st</sup>, a day which has a whole 5 hours and 24 minutes less daylight than the summer solstice on June 21<sup>st</sup>. And I don't think I'm alone in preferring the summer solstice to the winter solstice. A lack of daylight is a depressing thing. During these dreary winter months, you get home from work or school and the sun is already going down! But it's not all bad. Of course, during these dark winter months, we do have some bright sparks to look forward to here and there like Christmas, or a week later when there's still some festivities around the new year. But now, here we are in January, and that that's all behind us, and we're still stuck with some long, dark hours.

We're right in the middle of the months of SAD, that is Seasonal Affective Disorder. January and February are two of those months where *maybe* we're suffering from the post-holiday blues, there's not much to look forward to in the immediate future, it's cold outside, and the days are still very short. It can feel during these dark months like we are a people walking in darkness, living in a land of the shadow of death. But since we are an entire month *past* the winter solstice, that does mean that the days are getting gradually longer. More light is starting to filter into our lives, the season of darkness slowly retreating. And that can serve as a reminder to us of one of God's promises. In our text today, God speaks through Isaiah to a people walking in darkness with the promise of His **Light that Never Goes Out**.

Our current state of affairs with the long, dark hours and the months of SAD really pale in comparison to the depressing state of the people mentioned in our text. Isaiah mentions two of Israel's twelve tribes in particular: Zebulun and Naphtali. Perhaps you remember from your studies, when the Children of Israel finally came and conquered the promised land, they distributed the entire land between the twelve tribes. And, perhaps you also remember that nation eventually split into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In the south, only two of those twelve tribes comprised the land of Judah, they were the tribes of Judah and then also of Benjamin. That means that Zebulun and Naphtali, mentioned here in our text, they were in the north.

In fact, they were far in the north. Their tribal lands were at the northern tip of Israel, surrounding the Sea of Galilee, an area which would one day become known as the region of Galilee. And you might also recall the sad end to those ten tribes comprising the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Assyria was the world power at the time, and around 721 BC, that world power journeyed south and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the surviving members of those ten tribes were carried off into captivity, to become known as “The Lost Ten Tribes.”

Zebulon and Naphtali were the first to fall. In two successive campaigns, the great Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III, not only gained victory over Zebulon and Naphtali, but he totally conquered and renamed their lands. Tiglath-Pileser gave those ancestral lands new names, Assyrian names. The people of those tribes were the first to be carried off into captivity, and Gentile foreigners were imported by Assyria to inhabit those lands, people who would eventually become known as the Samaritans. And so, Zebulon and Naphtali not only lost the battle, they lost their identity, they lost their purpose. As the first to fall to the great Assyrian conquest, they lost all tribal connections with the people of Israel. “SAD” doesn’t even begin to describe the state of those two tribes. For them, there was seemingly no more light at all, the light permanently snuffed out.

It was this conquest by the Assyrians that Isaiah refers to in our text: ***“At first He [meaning the Lord] lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward more heavily oppressed her, by way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles.”*** God allowed all that had happened to Zebulon and Naphtali. Why? What had happened to them? Where did they go wrong? Zebulon and Naphtali had been delivered miraculously out of Egypt. They had walked on the dry land through the waters of the Red Sea. They had been fed and nourished for the journey in the wilderness. Upon arriving in the promised land after forty years, they were given their tribal inheritance! God had even raised up some of the mightiest prophets to send to *their* people: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea. Countless times in the history of Zebulon and Naphtali they’d cried out to the LORD for help, and He saved them. He delivered them. And after all that, they missed it. They didn’t recognize the Lord’s deliverance even as it danced right in front of their faces.

Their problem began *when* they *received* their tribal inheritance, those northern lands. They were instructed to drive out the inhabitants that lived there so that they would remain a people of the Lord and not seduced by the gods of the heathen. And they didn’t do so. Instead they lived *among* the Canaanites, and pretty soon they had discredited Jehovah God for all of His deliverance, and started serving the gods of Canaan instead. Even as those great prophets called for them to turn back to the Lord, the cries of the prophets fell on deaf ears. The result? The Assyrians brought the rod of the LORD’s anger. And that’s the night the lights went out in Zebulon and Naphtali.

Well, what about you and me? What has the Lord done for us? We too have been rescued from captivity. We’ve passed through the waters in the baptismal flood and delivered from our captivity to sin and death. We too are fed and nourished for our journey through life with the Lord’s own body and blood. You and I have been given our own lands, an inheritance that can never perish—our homeland of heaven. Countless times in our lives, each one of us have cried out to our God, and He has saved us, delivered us right in front of our faces. And how often do we miss it? How often do we fail to give the credit to God? *We’re just like Zebulon and Naphtali.*

Why? What happened to us? Where did we go wrong? The Apostle John explains our predicament, when he writes, ***“This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”*** (John 3:19) That’s our problem. As sinners, we prefer the dark to the light. That was the problem for those northern tribes, and that remains our problem still today. We truly are a people walking in darkness.

***“NEVERTHELESS,”*** Isaiah writes at the beginning of our text. Meaning, “However,” “In spite of this,” ***“Nevertheless,”*** you will not face the same judgment that Zebulun and Naphtali fell into. You will not be destroyed as they were, although we are very similar in a lot of ways. Isaiah explains, ***“Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who was distressed, as when at first He lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward more heavily oppressed her, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles. 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.”*** Though we prefer the darkness and though our works are darkness, ***“NEVERTHELESS,”*** the light of God’s grace cuts right through that darkness.

God does something about your darkness. He does not destroy you in judgment, instead He delivers you, just as Isaiah describes: ***“You have broken the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.”*** The day of Midian that Isaiah speaks of was a day when God raised up the Judge Gideon to journey up to Northern Israel and deliver those people from their bondage. That’s recorded for us in the book of the Judges, ***“Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, ‘A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!’”*** (7:20) God did not use traditional warfare to defeat the Midianites. Instead, the people of God raised up the light of their torches, the army of Midian panicked, and ran, and slew one another, and God made mincemeat out of Israel’s Midianite oppressors.

Several hundred years later, another light would shine with God’s deliverance. A dazzling light, a brilliant light, this time held in the hands of King Josiah. Holding in his hands and in his heart the rediscovered Book of the Law, the Bible—a lamp to his feet, a light for his path—King Josiah marched northward to reclaim those northern territories for God. He used God’s Word to renew their worship, to reform their faith. Even though those lands had forsaken the Lord and been delivered to the Assyrians long before, God raised up a man through His Word to reclaim them. For God had not forgotten about them, nor had He forsaken them. God’s light shined in the darkness and eliminated it.

But there came a time when even these great lights of deliverance went out. Gideon—who had once raised his torch for victory simply because the Lord had instructed it—he died. His wicked son Abimelech killed 68 of his brothers and crowned himself ruler over God’s people. The Baal worship that his father fought against returned, and the Lord returned evil to Abimelech. The light of those torches shining with the Lord’s victory became a distant memory for the people of Israel. And as for King Josiah, he burned out as well in his seemingly premature death at the battle of Meggido. The kings that followed him—Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah—all did evil in the sight of the Lord and then their southern kingdom of Judah was carried away in captivity as well, this time by Babylon. Once more—the Book of the Law which had once been rediscovered and re-venerated as God’s Word—once more it was forgotten by God’s people and left in the darkness.

So, what about the Light that God promises in our text, ***“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.”*** We know the people to whom God is speaking—the people who walk in darkness—we know them well, because that is us! And in spite of the darkness of our sin, God promises light, He promises deliverance. But, will *this* Light burn out? Is *this* a temporary deliverance? Will there come a time when *this* Light also ceases to shine? No, never. For this is a *great* Light. This is the Light that was announced to shepherds, when the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and ***“the glory of the Lord shown round about them.”*** (Luke 2:9) This is the Light that Simeon celebrated as ***“a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”*** (Luke 2:32) This is a dazzling light, a brilliant light. So much so that in our text Isaiah describes that Light using these terms: ***“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.”***

When this Light came into the world, He returned to those lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, giving them yet another chance to return to the Lord. That was found in our Gospel reading: ***“And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. . . From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”*** (Matthew 4:13) And this shows us that Christ came not to destroy sinners, but to destroy sin’s darkness; not to kill, but to give life.

And Jesus does the same for you. Jesus is this Light who took on flesh so He could take you into His arms, heal your hurts, forgive your filth, destroy your darkness. Jesus is the Light born in the flesh to live the life we could not and die our death so we need not. But would that death finally snuff out this light? In the final battle between light and darkness—the betrayal, the bloodshed, the bitter gall, the burial—would that be the final curtain call? You know the answer. *This* is a *great* Light.

The Apostle John writes, ***“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*** (John 1:5) This Light did not remain in the darkness of the grave, and the empty tomb means that this Light will never be burned out. Or, as Isaiah writes, ***“Of the increase of His government and peace, there will be no end.”*** This is an endless light, meaning we have reason for endless alleluias! It means that the old adage, “All good things must come to an end,” is simply not true. It means that your sins, no matter how dark they are, they cannot conquer the Light of God’s love and the deliverance of Christ’s forgiveness. It means that regardless of the time of year, regardless of any sadness in your life—even though you may sometimes feel like you are walking through some deep darkness—***“NEVERTHELESS,”*** your Light, your Savior, has shined upon you. You have been given the ***“light of life,”*** (cf. John 8:12) a **Light that Never Goes Out**. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.