

## **The People Who Walked in Darkness” (Isaiah 9:1–7; 60:1–3)**

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**Brian Watson**

It’s the most wonderful time of the year. Or, so the song goes. It’s also the darkest time of the year. Actually, the shortest day of the year will be Friday. In Boston, there will be only 9 hours, 4 minutes, and 37 seconds of daylight.<sup>1</sup> This time of the year can be a depressing time for many, particularly with all the bare trees, dead grass, the cold, and the darkness. There’s one thing that makes the darkness bearable: Christmas lights. For me, Christmas lights and Christmas music make this season a little more bearable. I suppose the darkness makes the lights stand out all the more.

But Christmas really isn’t about electric lights. It’s about another kind of light, a supernatural, divine light that pierced not literal darkness, but spiritual darkness. I don’t know if life feels dark for you right now or not. But the good news of Christmas is that the light of God has pierced the darkness. As John 1:5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, we’re going to look at a couple of passages from the book of Isaiah, which is found in the Old Testament. Isaiah was a prophet who was active in the eighth century BC, roughly seven hundred years before Jesus was born. Isaiah prophesied that a special child would come, and that when he came, “the people who walked in darkness” would see “a great light.” To appreciate why Jesus’ birth is such a big deal, we need to understand what that darkness is and why Jesus is the light of the world.

We’ll be looking mostly at Isaiah 9 today. We’ll start by reading the first two verses:

<sup>1</sup> But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,  
on them has light shone.

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<sup>1</sup> According to this website: <https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/usa/boston?month=12>.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

To understand why God promises good news, we have to first understand the bad. Isaiah 9 begins with these words: “But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.” What kind of anguish was this? Who was in anguish? Why would this person expect gloom?

The “she” refers to Israel. The nation was in rather bad shape at this point in time. Almost two hundred years earlier, Israel divided into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom, consisting of ten tribes, retained the name “Israel.” The southern kingdom was named for its most prominent tribe, Judah. The major reason for this split was idolatry. Instead of being faithful to God, Israel worshiped false gods. Politically, things were so bad that the northern kingdom of Israel tried to attack Judah by aligning with Syria. Isaiah 7 begins with these words:

<sup>1</sup> In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it.  
<sup>2</sup> When the house of David was told, “Syria is in league with Ephraim,” the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind (Isa. 7:1–2).

God told Isaiah not to fear Syria and Israel because their attack wouldn’t succeed. In a little while, Israel would be defeated by the Assyrians, the super power of the world at that time. Judah would remain in power for longer, though they would eventually fall to the Babylonian empire.

But though Judah would remain in power, they weren’t much better than Judah. King Ahaz was a bad man. This is what we read about Ahaz in 2 Kings 16:

<sup>1</sup> In the seventeenth year of Pekah the son of Remaliah, Ahaz the son of Jotham, king of Judah, began to reign. <sup>2</sup> Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his father David had done, <sup>3</sup> but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup> And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree (2 Kgs. 16:1–4).

Did you catch that? First, we’re told that “he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his father David had done.” David was the second king of Israel, from the tribe of Judah. He was the standard against which all other kings were measured. How bad was Ahaz? He sacrificed to false gods. But he didn’t offer up just any sacrifice. He offered his own son as an

offering. This was the kind of thing that other countries did, the ones that worshiped these false gods. Things were bad.

In Isaiah 8, God promised that people from both Israel and Judah would stumble because they rejected God. Verse 14 says, “And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” Isaiah said that God was “hiding his face from the house of Jacob,” because they had turned away from him (Isa. 8:17). And, at the end of chapter 8, right before the verses that we just read a moment ago, we read this about the people of Judah:

<sup>21</sup> They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward. <sup>22</sup> And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness (Isa. 8:21–22).

Now, even if you’re not following all the details of this political intrigue, you can understand the big point: The nation of Israel was at a low point, politically and religiously. God had promised them “distress and darkness” and “gloom of anguish.” This was a dark time, indeed.

Earlier this year, I watched a movie called *Darkest Hour*. The movie is about Winston Churchill in May 1940. Churchill was the First Lord of the Admiralty and then became the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi forces were sweeping through Europe. The previous Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, had tried to appease Hitler two years earlier, but it was clear that Hitler would not be content until Germany occupied all of Europe. Germany invaded France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. In a short amount of time, the Germans had nearly surrounded a large number of British troops at Dunkirk, France. It looked like all was lost.

Things weren’t quite that bad in Israel, at least not politically, but when you add in their religious failures, it’s not unreasonable to think that things were actually worse.

But now, in chapter 9, we’re given a message of hope. Verse 1 says, “In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.” Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes of Israel, whose land was in the north. This was “the area of Israel first humbled by foreign military invasions, and the region most influenced by foreign

cultures and religions.”<sup>3</sup> God promises here that one day, people who had walked in darkness will see a great light. In Churchill’s time, the first light was “the Miracle of Dunkirk”—over 300,000 soldiers were delivered from Dunkirk and brought on ships to England. Over a year later, the United States would join the war, and the tides would turn. Hitler would be defeated. What kind of light could Israel expect?

Before we read about what light would like for Israel, it’s worth pausing a moment and thinking about your own darkness. What seems dark to you right now? What would light look like? Perhaps you have a physical problem, or a relationship problem. Maybe it’s worries about money, or the future. What would it look like for light to break into these dark areas of your life?

Well, let’s see what kind of light God promised to Israel. Let’s read verses 3–5:

- <sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation;  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
- <sup>4</sup> For the yoke of his burden,  
and the staff for his shoulder,  
the rod of his oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- <sup>5</sup> For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be burned as fuel for the fire.

Isaiah says that God would multiply the nation and increase their joy, so that they would rejoice in the way they would at harvest. Remember that this was written about 2,700 or so years ago. For a people who relied upon local agriculture, the time of harvest would be a joyous time. But it’s not just a harvest. It’s also a time of deliverance. Israel’s burden, its oppressor, would be broken, just as God did to the Midianites. That’s a reference to a story in the book of Judges. This event probably happened roughly five hundred years before Isaiah’s day. This is what the beginning of Judges 6 says:

- <sup>1</sup> The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. <sup>2</sup> And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds.
- <sup>3</sup> For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and

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<sup>3</sup> Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 238.

the people of the East would come up against them. <sup>4</sup> They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. <sup>5</sup> For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. <sup>6</sup> And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD (Judges 6:1–6).

Israel did evil things, so God gave them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. Then when the people cried out to God, he answered. He delivered Israel from Midian through an unlikely hero named Gideon, a man who was so afraid he was trying to sift wheat at the bottom of a winepress instead of on top of a hill. In essence, he was hiding. But God found him. And God used him and a small army of 300 men to defeat the Midianites. God promises here that he will do something like that again, but on a larger scale. So, part of the light that God shines on his people is a defeat of their enemy.

But there's more. Let's read verses 6 and 7:

- <sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- <sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Here is the promise of a child, a son. The government shall be upon his shoulder, which is a way of saying that the nation will be built upon him. And he has a name that God will call him. He will be “Wonderful Counselor,” which highlights his wisdom. He will be called “Mighty God.” It's possible that this name could be translated, “God is Mighty.” Mere humans could have that name. After all, some people in the Old Testament had names like “God Saves” (Joshua). But in Isaiah 10:21, there's a reference to “the mighty God.” So, this child will be God himself. He will be called “Everlasting Father.” This isn't a reference to God the Father, but “Father” can be a term for a leader, and God himself is known as “everlasting” or “eternal.” He

will also be called “Prince of Peace.” He will bring about true peace, not just from foreign armies, but the peace that comes from being reconciled to God.

We know from our perspective that this is a reference to Jesus. He is the son who was born who is also God. He is the one who is both man and God. He is from everlasting because he has always existed as the Son of God, but he added a second nature, becoming a baby over two thousand years ago. We celebrate this miracle every Christmas.

We know that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy because he is the only one who fits this description. Also, the Gospel of Matthew quotes the first two verses of Isaiah when Jesus begins his public ministry. This is what he writes:

<sup>13</sup> And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

<sup>15</sup> “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
<sup>16</sup> the people dwelling in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,  
on them a light has dawned.”

<sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:13–17).

That last verse gets to the heart of what Jesus did on Earth. Jesus is the true King of the world, the perfectly wise and just ruler. And he called people into the kingdom of God. This means that we don’t start out life as part of God’s kingdom. The reason why Jesus is the Prince of Peace is because he is able to give us true peace—not peace from some foreign army that threatens us, but peace with God. We don’t start life with that peace because we are rebels against God. From the beginning, humans have not wanted to fulfill the purpose for which God made us, which is to know him, love him, come under his authority, represent him, reflect his glory, worship him, and obey him lovingly as his children. Instead, we reject our Father and we try to do life on our terms. In short, we want to be God. Or we make other created things our god.

But this is not how God made us to be. So, we are rebels against God. And because God cares about his creation and his plans, he put limits on rebellious humans. The first humans were removed from a perfect world, evicted from the garden of Eden. Consequently, we live in a fallen world, a world of strife, of hatred and war, of disease and death. When humans turned

away from God, the source of beauty, light, and life, we found ugliness, darkness, and death. Yes, death is the great punishment for sin.

This past week, I read a new book about death, called *Remember Death*, by Matthew McCullough. He says, “Death is a punishment for human pride. It exposes our foolish confidence in our freedom to be whoever we want to be.”<sup>4</sup> That may sound harsh. But the reason why we die is because we don’t fulfill the purpose for which God made us. McCullough writes, “Every human who has ever lived would rather be the sun than reflect its light.”<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of our darkness is a spiritual problem. It’s a relationship problem. We have a broken relationship with God. But many people don’t realize this problem. This is particularly true in affluent, prosperous societies like ours. People who have been poor and oppressed have often been more ready to accept that life is dark and that the only light that will truly heal us must come from God. But we live with the illusion that we can fix our problems. Just give us enough time, money, education, technology, and there will be worldwide peace.

Almost twenty years ago, a movie called *The Matrix* was released. I’m not sure a lot of us here saw that movie, but it was very popular. It was popular because it had a unique visual style and some original fighting sequences. But it was also popular because it told a bold story. In the world of the Matrix, reality is not what it seems. The story takes place in the near future. At some point in the early twenty-first century, machines with artificial intelligence started to fight against humans. They required solar power, and humans found a way to block out the sun. The machines found another way to get the energy that they needed: they started to use humans as an energy source. They put humans into pods, with wires connected to their bodies to get energy and wires connected to their brains to fool humans into thinking that they were living a “real life.” Humans thought that life was much like we see it today. Little did they know that they were actually experiencing a computerized simulation, a dream world. The real world was dark, and there was no freedom. People were slaves to the machines.

You have to experience the movie if you haven’t seen it yet. But if you have seen it, you can appreciate that it represents something of the Christian worldview. The main character is a Christ-figure. His last name is Anderson, which literally means “son of man.” But he gets a new name, Neo, because he is something new, “The One” who will defeat the evil of the Matrix. He

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

dies but is resurrected by the love of Trinity, which is the name of a character. Ultimately, he sacrifices himself to defeat evil (in the third movie of *The Matrix* trilogy). But the point is that reality is not what it appears to be, and that is certainly what Christianity says.

All our entertainments, all our distractions, are merely diversions. Our movies and television shows, our video games and social media, are artificial lights that often keep us from thinking about spiritual darkness. Because we don't think about our spiritual darkness, we don't consider the light of God that has come to save us.

This situation reminds me of C. S. Lewis's creative book, *The Screwtape Letters*. It's a work of fiction, consisting of letters written from a senior demon to his nephew, a younger demon who is learning the ropes of how to distract and tempt people away from God and to Satan. Again, this is fiction, not a statement of how things really work in the spiritual realm.

In the first letter, Screwtape (the senior demon) tells his nephew, Wormwood, not to use arguments to keep people "out of the Enemy's clutches."<sup>6</sup> ("The Enemy" here is God.) Instead, the goal is to keep people from thinking. Screwtape writes,

The trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle on to the Enemy's own ground. He can argue too; whereas in really practical propaganda of the kind I am suggesting He has been shown for centuries to be greatly the inferior of Our Father Below. By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result? Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favour, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream of immediate sense experiences. Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it 'real life' and don't let him ask what he means by 'real'.<sup>7</sup>

We might call "the stream" the Internet, or TV, or any other diversion that keeps us from thinking about things that truly matter. Writing almost four hundred years ago, before electricity, radio, movies, TV, or computers, Blaise Pascal said that we divert ourselves from the truth because it is miserable. We can't stand to think about our misery and death, so we distract ourselves. He also says that if we were truly happy, we wouldn't need to do this. So, our constant diversions are proof of our unhappiness, of our spiritual darkness. And no amount of money, entertainment, achievements, relationships, or anything else that we can provide for ourselves will fix this situation.

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<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942; New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

But over two thousand years ago, a light penetrated the darkness. The Son of God became a man. He taught us about the human condition and how to live. He lived the perfect life that we don't live, thus fulfilling God's plans for humanity. And though he never did anything wrong, he died. He died because people didn't believe him. Instead, they hated him. He died because he was regarded as a threat. But the ultimate reason why he died was because it was God's plan, so that God could punish our sin without destroying us.

Everyone who trusts in Jesus sees that he is light. The light exposes our darkness, but it also heals. It illuminates the way of truth, the way back to God. And that way—the only way—is Jesus himself.

Those who are united to Jesus are brought out of darkness into his marvelous light (Col. 1:13–14; 1 Pet. 2:9). Colossians 1:13–14 says,

<sup>13</sup> He [God the Father] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The kingdom of Jesus is the perfect kingdom because he is the perfect King. Isaiah 9:7 says,

Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

David was promised that one of his “sons” would reign forever (2 Sam. 7:12–16). Jesus is that son, a descendant of David. But unlike David and all the other kings of Israel, Jesus is perfect, because he reigns “with justice and with righteousness.” Think about all the other rulers who have ever lived. They all have flaws, some of them quite obvious. Just think of our politicians today. Could anyone say with a straight face that they will bring salvation?

Jesus is the only King who is perfect, and the only King who would die for you. He is the only King who came back from the dead.

If you come to know King Jesus, you will see the light. That doesn't mean life is easy. We still live in a dark world. We still wrestle with temptation and sin. We still get diseases and die. But the light is coming. In this season of Advent, we look back to Jesus' first coming and we anticipate his second coming, when he will make all things right.

There are passages in Isaiah that speak of a renewed world, where there is no more death (Isa. 25:6–9; 65:17–25). At that time, the light will come in its fullest. Isaiah 60:1–3 says,

- <sup>1</sup> Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
- <sup>2</sup> For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.
- <sup>3</sup> And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising.

God promises that people from all over the Earth will come to the light of Jesus. And when he returns, he will destroy the enemies of his people: Satan, their sin, and death itself. Then, God's people will dwell with him in a perfect world. But those who have rejected Jesus, those who have been apathetic, indifferent, or even hostile to Jesus, will not live in this world. They will be cast out into outer darkness, a place from which there is no salvation. We have this time, right now, to turn to Jesus and trust him.

If you don't know Jesus, I urge you to turn to the light. You will have to let the light expose your failures. But admitting our problems is the only way to be healed. Jesus stands ready to forgive you. If you don't know him, I would love to talk to you about how to follow Jesus.

If you do know Jesus, be thankful. And if life feels dark, hang on. The light is coming.