

Advent Light

Isaiah 9:1-2

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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.

*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. – Isaiah 9:1-2, ESV*

Introduction: People Who Walk in Darkness

Have you ever tried to walk around in the dark, in absolute darkness? I don't mean relative darkness where you can give your eyes a few minutes to adjust and then you can see. But have you ever tried to find your way in absolute darkness? It's very disorienting and nerve-wracking. Even if you're the kind of person who's not really "afraid of the dark," trying to move in complete and utter darkness is a scary experience.

Let me ask you another question: Have you ever been walking around in darkness, finding your way as best you can when someone suddenly turns on the lights? It can be disorienting, even painful, can't it, even though it leads to a better situation for you.

In Isaiah 9:2, the people are described in two ways, as "people who walked in darkness" and as "those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness." Isaiah uses two different words for darkness here. The first is just the normal word for darkness, like the darkness that comes at night. The second word, which the ESV translates as "deep darkness," is a more oppressive and ominous word that means the "shadow of death," or the "darkness of the grave," an absolute and terrifying darkness. This is the word used in Psalm 23:4, "Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

These two statements about darkness, taken together, describe a people whose lifestyle, character and conduct of life is dark- that is, wicked and also miserable. And they live in a land of absolute darkness, of terrifying and oppressive evil and the constant threat of death.

To put it in clearer terms, these were God’s covenant people who lived lives of moral compromise, of immorality, of idolatry and unfaithfulness to God, in the midst of a land that was characterized by immorality, unfaithfulness, idolatry and the threat of violence. That doesn’t sound all that different from our own cultural situation, does it?

I. Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles

So, who were these people walking in darkness in a land of deep darkness? Well, verse one specifically identifies these people as Zebulun and Naphtali and the further identifies them as living in “*the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*” (or *Galilee of the Gentiles*)

Zebulun and Naphtali were two tribes of Israel and they were among the Northern tribes, two of the ten tribes that ended up in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and not the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The name Galilee means district or circle and refers to the whole region west of the Sea of Geneserath, which became known as the Sea of Galilee because of the region.

Here, Isaiah calls the area “Galilee of the nations” or “Galilee of the Gentiles” for good reason. Going back to the days of King Solomon, this region of Israel was heavily populated by non-Israelites. 1 Kings 9:11 tells us that King Solomon gave Hiram, King of Tyre twenty cities in Galilee in exchange for the materials Hiram gave for the Temple. So this region was quickly populated by Phoenicians and had been for hundreds of years by the time Isaiah prophesied; thus it was known as “Galilee of the Gentiles.”

A. Invasion from Hostile Enemy

Being on the Northern Fringes of Israel also made this region subject to invasion and raids and warfare. 2 Kings 15:29 tells us of one of these invasions, which is probably the one that had happened before Isaiah gives this prophecy: “*In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria.*” This was in 734 – 732 B.C., during the ministry of Isaiah. So this invasion and captivity is probably what Isaiah has in mind as the “contempt” and “anguish” this area was brought into.

B. Compromise with Pagan Neighbors

Besides the threat from the outside which this area frequently faced, having a heavily Gentile population in their midst had consequences for this region. They became religiously pluralistic, tolerating the worship of foreign deities in their midst and often adopting some of the Pagan

Gentiles' religious practices themselves. Thus, they were "walking in darkness" and could be considered spiritually as a "land of deep darkness."

II. From Contempt to Glory

What could be done for such a pitiful, contemptible region?

A. Contempt from Friends and Enemies

This region indeed suffered contempt, from both their fellow Israelites and the outside enemies of God. To Israelites, this was an impure area, an area "of the Gentiles," a place of compromise and corrupt worship, of mixed-breed Jews and idolators. For those on the outside, this was an easy area to plunder and exploit.

Some of the contempt this area suffered can be seen in the Gospels themselves. In John I, when Jesus called Philip and Nathanael to follow Him, Philip excitedly tells his brother, Nathanael, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." (John 1:45-46)

People from Galilee apparently spoke with a distinct accent or spoke a unique dialect, because when Peter was denying Jesus on the night He was betrayed, he was easily identified as a Galilean.

Interestingly, Philip and Nathanael were also from Galilee, but they were from Bethsaida, which was apparently a fairly wealthy town on the Northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, whereas Nazareth was a simple, poor village in the mountains of Galilee, in the region of Naphtali. So even within Galilee, which was itself held in contempt by those in Jerusalem and Judea, there were local areas held in greater contempt and, apparently, Nazareth was among the most contemptible.

We can sort of get a comparison today by thinking about the South. People in the sophisticated, educated areas of the North sometimes look down on those from the South. True Southerners can be identified by their Southern dialect, which is generally not equated with high intelligence and education. Further, within the South, some areas are held in contempt more so than others. People from North Carolina look down on South Carolina. I heard one North Carolinian refer to South Carolina as the "arm-pit" of the South. People from Georgia look down on people from Alabama, who, in turn, look down their noses at Mississippi.

In Bible times, Galilee of the Gentiles was perceived as uneducated, unsophisticated, morally and spiritually compromised. It was held in contempt.

B. Made Glorious by the Presence of the Lord

Yet Isaiah says that this area, this region would be “made glorious.” In fact, Isaiah foresees it with such prophetic clarity that he speaks of it as an accomplished reality: “*in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*”

Isaiah saw, over 700 years before the birth of Jesus, that this area would be the place where light would shine, where great light would be seen, that God Himself would make this area glorious. Over 700 years after Isaiah gave the words of this prophecy, the angel Gabriel came to a young virgin in Nazareth. Let’s read it for ourselves in Luke 1:26-33:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (ESV)

Exiles and restorations, warfare, conquest and political turmoil has shaken the land of Israel for over 700 years since Isaiah’s day, so that a son of David, Joseph, was living in the land of Zebulun in the town of Nazareth, in the region of Galilee of the Gentiles.

I want us to all see how precise, how careful and exacting our God is. Around the same time that Isaiah gave this prophecy, the prophet Micah foretold clearly that the great King over God’s people would come from the village of Bethlehem, five miles outside Jerusalem, around 70 miles away from Nazareth, but closer to 100 miles of travelling along the roads of the time. Micah said, in Micah 5:2:

*“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
 who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
 from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to be ruler in Israel,
 whose coming forth is from of old,
 from ancient days.” (ESV)*

In the days when Jesus was due to be born, Caesar Augustus issued a decree from Rome that all the world should be registered for a census. At this time, Herod the Great ruled over all of the land of Israel, over Nazareth as well as Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and it may have been Herod who had all the Jews register in their ancestral home cities. Thus Joseph, being of the line of David, took his new bride, who was pregnant, and travelled to Bethlehem, the City of David, to be registered for the tax. While they were there, taking care of the government's requirement, Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem.

After Jesus' birth, we have reason to believe that Mary and Joseph settled in Bethlehem and may have planned to remain there, Joseph being a carpenter and there being some scandalous gossip back home about Mary's pregnancy. But when King Herod heard about the birth from the wise men, he planned to kill Jesus by killing all the boys in Bethlehem aged 2 and under. God warned Joseph about this in a dream, so Joseph fled to Egypt. At this time, he could not have fled to Nazareth, because Nazareth was also under Herod's rule.

In fleeing to Egypt and returning some years later, Joseph and Mary and Jesus re-enacted Israel's history, leaving the Promised Land in time of distress, spending some time in Egypt and then being called back by God to Israel. Only, when Joseph returns to Israel, he learns that Herod's son, Herod Archelaus is reigning in Jerusalem, so he decides to avoid trouble and settles back in Nazareth instead. He can do this because Israel was split up after the death of Herod the Great, so that Herod Archelaus rules Jerusalem and Bethlehem but not Galilee and Nazareth.

So . . . Jesus is born in Bethlehem, flees into exile in Egypt, is called out of Egypt to Nazareth, and when He begins His earthly ministry, it is out of Nazareth and in Galilee.

Most of Jesus' earthly ministry, His teaching and miracles, the calling of His disciples, etc. all happens in Zebulun and Naphtali, in Galilee of the Gentiles. Jesus is from Nazareth in Zebulun. If you look at a map of the ministry of Jesus, you'll see that almost all of the events of the Gospels take place in this specific region, in Zebulun and Naphtali, in Galilee of the Gentiles.

It is here that Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, officially launching His public ministry with these words:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61, ESV)

It is here that He called His disciples, where Peter and Andrew, James and John had the miraculous catch of fish and then left their nets to follow Jesus. It is here that Jesus fed the 5,000, probably just outside of Bethsaida in Naphtali. It is here where He walked on water and calmed the Sea, here where He gave the Sermon on the Mount, healed so many sick, cast out so many demons, raised the son of the Widow of Nain, turned water in to wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Very specifically and clearly, Jesus carries out His earthly ministry in this exact location.

III. From Darkness to Light

A. Walking in Darkness in a Land of Darkness

It is interesting that Jesus chose to launch His public ministry by reading words from Isaiah, Isaiah 61. I don't know what the people of Zebulun and Naphtali thought when they heard these words from Isaiah 9, when this section of Isaiah was read in the many synagogues that dotted the landscape of Galilee:

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.

*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.*

In Jesus' childhood and early adulthood, when these words were read, perhaps they sounded like a joke, an empty promise. It has been well over 700 years since Isaiah had spoken these words and still they were held in contempt, still they were living in darkness. The Assyrians had been replaced by the Babylonians, who has been replaced by the Persians and then the Greeks and now the Romans, but they had been under pagan Gentile rule and held in contempt for 750 years continually.

But God chose to fulfill this prophecy by sending His Son, born of a virgin from Nazareth, to come as the Light of the World to shine His light on Galilee of the Gentiles. In Hebrew culture, light is a symbol of Truth and Righteousness, of right words and right deeds. Jesus, in His ministry of Truth and Righteousness, shone His light as the Light of the World on those walking in darkness in the land of deep darkness. He spoke the truth as the Truth. He fulfilled God's word as the Word of God incarnate.

B. The Great Light Has Come to Shine on Us

What about you this Advent season? What is your darkness?

God made Galilee glorious by sending Jesus to it. Think of how we think about Galilee, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Cana of Galilee and all of these other places today. We think of them as the places where Jesus lived, taught and ushered in the kingdom of God. Today, these places are still politically risky and surrounded by danger and darkness, but they are some of the most sought-after places in the world, as people want to walk where Jesus walked.

God made Galilee glorious by sending Jesus into it. He did not bring them to create their own light; He sent His Light, the Light of the World, into their midst and He changed lives.

Jesus said He came for the sick and not for the healthy. He came to seek and to save the lost. And so it makes perfect sense that He came to the most dark, wayward, compromised, contemptible place in Israel. By the time He got to the respectable, powerful people in Jerusalem, all they wanted to do was to kill Him, be rid of Him. But the contemptible rabble of Gentile-infested Galilee sat at His feet, listened to His teaching, were healed by His touch, fed by His hands and forever transformed by His presence.

So I ask again, what about you this Advent season? What is your darkness, the darkness in your own heart and the darkness in your land? We surely live in a land of deep darkness, a land where the shadow of death looms over our culture like an oppressive fog. Our hearts are dark, too, and we walk in darkness.

Where is our hope this Advent, this Christmas season?

Conclusion: Has the Great Light Shone in You?

There is only one Hope. Has the Great Light of the World shone on you? Is He shining in you? Has Jesus Himself brought His righteousness, His truth and His life into your life? Is He your light? Are you walking in Him? Over the next couple of weeks, we will continue to work our way through Isaiah 9:1-7 and we'll see what difference it makes when the Light of the World shines upon us and how we can walk in His light this Advent, Christmas, New Year and for the rest of our lives.