

Christmas Eve 5:00PM

"The Light Shines"

Isaiah 9

Please remain standing while I read Isaiah 9:1-7. So we only have seven verses here though I'm really just going to focus on the first two verses. But we need to see the context so we can see where Isaiah the prophet is going with this. So please join me.

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 a light shone. 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. 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. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. 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, of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

This is the word of the Lord. Please be seated.

Well, when I was a child, around the ages of five or six, it was right in that period of time -- I went into a season in life where I was terribly afraid of the dark. I don't know what brought it on. I was around five years old, and it was like someone just turned it on. And then around age six, maybe a little bit older, it just suddenly went away. But there was something about the dark. There was something about the shadows, the turning off of the lights at night to go to bed. And I remember I would just be paralyzed, imagining what could be there in that place just beyond where my eyes could see. I can remember my mother particularly just desperately wanting to go to sleep, okay? And saying, Scotty, just go to sleep. I go, I can't sleep and she would say this. I remember her saying this a couple times. She says, you know, every night you say you can't sleep and yet, you know, every single night you do finally sleep. And she's right. There's something to that. There's something to the fact that it seems like there's nothing that can overcome the fear, and then you just fall asleep. But there were a few times. There were times where I ended up just staying up all through the night. And I remember that feeling as you're lying in your bed, and that kind of pale blue light starts coming through the windows and it's no longer dark, and you start to hear the birds chirp. And even though you're exhausted, even though you're wiped out after the night of darkness, there's just something about seeing that that pale blue light, the glint of the dawn. See, the dark of night is always followed by the light of morning. Isn't it interesting that this is a cycle? It's kind of a liturgy that we as humans live out every single day of our lives. Where the day wanes, it goes to darkness. And then there's this moment when the sun rises again and the solemnity, the stillness, the fears of the night are followed by that revealing light, the glint on the sunrise that slowly gives way to day.

Notice this because in this passage, Isaiah is talking about the gloom of night. We often blow right past this to go to the titles of Jesus that we just heard about, the wonderful titles of his kingship. It's a kind of coronation ceremony. If you want to know more about the titles, come back to the eleven o'clock service tonight when Benny Parks will preach through the titles and their meaning. But for now, I want to focus on that context to the coronation of the King.

It's the prophet Isaiah declaring that the darkness of night and the people who walk in it will one day give way to a sunrise. Now notice he does start with the people who are walking in the gloom. They're walking in the darkness. Okay. And we might think as we read this, we say, oh, he's talking about the world, right? The darkness of the world because of sin. And Jesus will come one day and he'll be a light in the world. And that is true. And yet, notice Isaiah is talking about a very specific group of people here in this passage. He even tells us, Zebulun, Naphtali, in the region of the Galilee, he's talking about specific people. And we should remember this too. He's preaching to a southern kingdom audience, the kingdom of Judah. He's preaching to this audience, but he's not preaching about them. He's preaching about their brothers to the north, the northern Kingdom. That's where Zebulun. That's where Naphtali and the region of the Galilee is. And you see, they're walking in darkness. But it's kind of a self-generated darkness that they're walking in. They're not walking in darkness because they've done right and they've somehow suffered for their righteousness, rather. Actually, the northern kingdom had turned against the Lord. They'd actually sided themselves with a foreign army, the Arameans, and they had actually planned and plotted together to go down to Judah and to wipe it out, to conquer Judah for themselves and establish their own puppet king. This is actually what Isaiah is talking about in Isaiah seven, the famous passage about the Virgin who would give birth to a child and his name would be called Immanuel. Go read the context to that. And you realize it's this conflict between the North and the South, and as a result of their sin, as a result of their rebellion, the Lord sends the northern Kingdom into exile ahead of Judah. The northern kingdom goes in first some one hundred and forty years before Judah goes into exile. And you see, that's the darkness that he's talking about. So can you see how this prophecy reads a little bit differently in Judah's ears as they're hearing this about the traitors to the north, their brothers and sisters who turned against their family and took up arms with the Arameans to come down to Judah and to try to conquer them. And now Isaiah, who is a Judah prophet, he's one of their own guys. He should understand the sensitivities here. He comes down to Judah, and he says, those traitors, those brothers and sisters who turned against you, they really did do evil. They're in darkness. But be of good cheer, be of good cheer. The sun will once again shine upon them as well. You can imagine the Judahites being like, excuse me, they deserve what they got. Isaiah. What do you mean? The sun will shine on them again. And so actually this prophecy has quite a different a quite a different message.

If you're reading this from the Judahite perspective, the king who is coming, the king in the line of David, who will be called Prince of Peace and Mighty God and Wonderful Counselor and Everlasting Father. He will be a blessing to the Northern Kingdom as much as to the southern Kingdom. You see, that is where the light will shine. Again. Matthew, the gospel writer, tells us when this is fulfilled. It's fulfilled very early in Jesus' ministry in Matthew chapter four, verses fifteen and sixteen, after Jesus is fresh off of his victory against Satan in the desert as he's conquered Satan's temptations, he then comes back victorious. But notice where Matthew takes him not up to Jerusalem to sit upon a throne, the one who's finally crushed the head of the serpent. No! Where does he go? He goes to Zebulun and Naphtali in the region of Galilee. And he says, repent and believe my kingdom. The kingdom of God is at hand. The way that Matthew seems to be telling it is actually kind of like this. The ones who went into exile first, who went into the dark night of exile. They will see the dawn first. Jesus doesn't just allow the

northern Kingdom to come back in. Jesus prioritizes their restoration. He prioritizes their mourning. He prioritizes the sun shining again in their midst. Now spiritual gloom happens to us all. Spiritual darkness happens to every one of us. It can sometimes be like with the Northern Kingdom. It can be because of our own rebellion.

There are those of you here who feel like you are living in a time of a kind of spiritual night. And if you were honest with yourself, you know exactly why you're living in that experience. You know what you've done that you, like. The Northern Kingdom, have turned aside from the Lord, and you've tried to establish your own agendas, your own sources for comfort, your own sources for security. Really, that is the definition of idolatry in the Old Testament and in the new. And today for us as well. Where are you finding comfort? Where are you finding security? Where are you finding convenience apart from God, the God of your salvation? You see, a sense of spiritual gloom and night can follow, but there's also a darkness. That's not because of rebellion that we've done. It's not because of our own idolatry. It's just living in a broken world. You're wrestling with the realities of a world that's been broken by sin. You've been diagnosed with an illness, and there doesn't seem to be much hope in the prognosis. You've lost a loved one. You're dissatisfied with your job, and you don't really know where your life is going. You're dissatisfied in your marriage or in your other relationships, the ones that are closest to you and you feel like you've just got all these unmet expectations. You thought things were going to turn out one way, but they've turned out another way. This can bring about a sense of spiritual gloom, of spiritual darkness.

I remember a friend of mine telling me this. She said, It's not that I don't feel God's presence. I'm not even sure I'm desiring to feel his presence. And that was a profound thing for her to say, because I think that's something that a lot of us can relate to. It's not just that I feel alienated from God, that I feel like I'm living in a kind of spiritual gloom. I'm not sure I even desire to be in the morning. I'm not sure I desire to be in the light. That's a good thing to pray for. And she and I prayed for that, too. We prayed that the Lord would conform her desires, conform our desires to the desire of the God of the morning. You see, there's a hope in that.

Some of you are dealing with the darkness of this world, and you feel it. You feel it acutely. You feel how things are not the way they're supposed to be. You feel that there are shadows, that there's darkness, and there should be light, but there's not light. It's gloom. And you're longing for the things of the morning. You're longing for the light to shine. Again, I want to encourage you. I want to encourage you. The desire for the dawn is a sign of hope. The desire for the sun to rise again on the ridges around Birmingham. Right. Spiritually, the desire for that is a cause for hope. As a matter of fact, that is the essence of what in Scripture we call faith. The author of Hebrews says this faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Notice it's not the things that are here right now. It's the things hoped for. It's the conviction of things not seen. There are many of you who are in the gloom, and you're longing for the morning. You're longing for that pale blue light to come in through the windows, for the birds to start chirping. I want to tell you that's a cause for hope because there's also a kind of person who is in the darkness, who is in the gloom, and they don't even recognize that it's a darkness or gloom. That's a scary place to be. That's a scary place to be in the darkness of the night and not to even know that you're in the darkness of the night. It's driving around at night with your headlights off, and you're just wondering why you keep bumping into things. Because you don't realize that that's not the way it's supposed to be.

You see, recognizing the night for what it is a sign that you are a person upon whom the light has shown, even in just hoping for the morning. You see, if you feel the pain, if you recognize

the effects of this broken world after the fall. If you see the goodness of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, marked by mercy and by justice. That's a sign of hope. You see, if Christmas brings to mind for you the difficulty of this life. Maybe it brings back painful memories of your past. Maybe it reminds you of the people who aren't here this year to do Christmas with you, but they were here last year. If it reminds you of the pain of this life, I want to encourage you. That is a sign of life. That's a sign of the light. You see, this is a cause for hope. For if we sense in this world the darkness. And we long for the light.

By the way, for those of you who may be sitting here and you're like, what does that feel like? It can be a powerful impulse. It can be this terribly powerful emotional response to what you see in the world around you. But it can also just be this subtle nagging. I'd want to encourage you in this tonight if you were kind of feeling that you're like...I celebrate with Christmas. I love the gifts, I love the presents. I love all the joy and the holly and the flowers. But there's just it reminds me that there's something wrong. I want to encourage you in that. Take that to the Lord. Consider Christ. Don't neglect that inward impulse.

As we just read for the Christ Candle from John chapter one, verses four through five. John is talking about the coming of Christ, and he says in him Jesus in him was life, and that life was the light of man. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness cannot overcome it. This begins this theme of light. You could read all the way from John to the letters of John to the Book of Revelation. You can trace this theme of light through John. The darkness can't overcome it. You see, as much as we are aware of the darkness in the world around us, there is a light that is already here, and it's shining and it's expanding like the stars in the night sky. Till it will one day fill the whole sky. Because the light is winning.

In the old Greek dramas, you had two different major kinds of dramas. You had the comedy which ended well, right? And you had the tragedy which ended. Sadly, I think about this continues on through Western culture. In our dramas. You have Shakespeare's tragedies like Romeo and Juliet, right? And then you had the comedies, the ones that end. Well, the gospel story is this, though this life looks like a tragedy. The Lord is now about the work of making it a comedy. Even the sorrows of our past are not great enough to compare to the incredible, beautiful ending that our Savior has in store for us. Christmas reminds us that morning is here and there's much to be joyful about. So as the sun rises tomorrow morning, as this night, this evening now comes to an end. And the sun rises tomorrow morning. And the sun does peek over those ridgelines around Birmingham. And you find yourself waking up to Christmas morning. And parents of young children, let me just tell you, I grieve with you. You saw my five daughters. We've been there. Some of you are going to be awake a whole lot earlier than the dawn. Okay? But as that sun comes up, the joy of those gifts around the tree, the excitement of getting a day off, of being able to take a moment to breathe and rest, that is just a dim reflection, my friends. Just a dim reflection of the great gift of grace that we have and that we see there in that Christ child laying in the manger. You see the people who walked in the dark of night on them. The morning has shown, and here is the gift. This is the gift of grace that we have in this Christ child. The gift that William Butler Yeats, the poet, refers to as this. He talks about Christ in the manger this way he says this Christ in the manger is the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor. I love that here on the bestial floor of this farmhouse where the animals lay, we find an uncontrollable mystery. And here's the mystery that that baby who was born will set his face like flint towards Jerusalem. But when he arrives there, he will not ascend to a Jerusalem white throne, but rather he will ascend to a Roman cross where he will hang in the gloom in a day that is made dark. One final true night before the dawn of resurrection. He passed through the darkness so that we would not have to.

Brothers and sisters, if you are in Christ, if you've turned away from your self-made kingdom, if you've repented of your sin, you've turned away from destruction and from the darkness, and you've embraced the morning. I want you to know this if you have been counted with him, Jesus Christ, then you are letting him pass through the darkness so that you can survive to the morning.

The church has set aside the season of Advent and Christmas to mark the world historical event of Christ's birth. We close our businesses, we close our financial markets, and those are all nice things to do. We do our morning ritual with the gifts around the tree. I know that for many, this holiday can bring back many, many great and wonderful sentimental feelings. It can also bring back many hard and difficult feelings too. But I don't want you in the midst of all of these feelings, to miss the truth of the thing that we are remembering and remembering this, that God does pay heed. He sees you. He knows you. He's walked your life. He's dealt with those unmet expectations, life not quite turning out the way you hoped it might. He knows what it's like to have complicated and difficult family gatherings. He knows what it's like to be misunderstood, to be about one thing, but have everyone accuse you of being about another thing and notice it did not turn him away from us. It did not make him throw down his hands in frustration and just leave. But rather he walked our lives all the way to the end, even unto death, so that we may truly live. No matter how dark the darkness may feel. The light has already shown. Morning has broken in the darkness cannot overcome it.

Let's pray.

Heavenly father, as we come before you, Lord, I pray that we would find in our own lives the illumination of Jesus Christ, that the spirit of the son, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit Himself, would testify to our spirits about the lordship of the one, the word who came and took on flesh, who went through the night so that we might survive to the morning. Lord, draw us to you. We pray on this Christmas season in Christ's name.

Amen.