

Christian, Look to the Light!

I. Darkness envelopes the world

II. Yet, the light of Christ dawns

*19 When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? 20 Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. 21 Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. 22 Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*

*9 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—*

*2 The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.*

*3 You have enlarged the nation  
and increased their joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as people rejoice at the harvest,  
as warriors rejoice  
when dividing the plunder.*

*4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat,  
you have shattered  
the yoke that burdens them,  
the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor.*

Tell me, are you tired of winter yet? The cold, the snow, the short days and long nights. You realize, for a lot of people, this is kind of a depressing time of year. In fact, for some people, this time of year brings with it a form of depression called Seasonal Affective Disorder. Have you heard of that? Seasonal affective disorder or SAD is how a lot of people feel when there just isn't enough sunlight to go around. It can leave people feeling restless and moody, even hopeless, angry or depressed. That's what can happen when there's just a little too much darkness in our lives.

Is there a way to treat such Seasonal Affective Disorders? Yes, there is. It typically involves, in one way or another, bringing more light into our lives. Maybe that means getting

outside more often, making sure the blinds on our windows are open, or using something called a light therapy lamp, or a “light box” which mimics the light of the sun. Every morning people turn on the light box to bring a little more sunshine into their lives. They look to that light to help stave off the effects of the increased darkness this time of year.

Friends, you realize that the idea of looking into the light to counter the effects of darkness applies to more than just our mental and physical well-being. It also applies to our spiritual well-being. As we look at what's going on in the world around us, we see a whole lot of spiritual darkness. There's a lot of really nasty stuff going on in our world. And it can leave us feeling down in the dumps, if not angry or even scared. But just as there is a way to overcome the increased darkness of a Wisconsin winter, there's a way to overcome the increased darkness in our world. And it's basically the same tactic, and that is, to look to the light. No, not the light of a therapy lamp. But rather, look to the Light of Christ. That's the message that the prophet Isaiah has for each of us today as we consider this theme today:

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Here in Isaiah chapter 8 and 9, the inspired writer makes two key points. He says, I. Darkness has enveloped the world, but II. The Light of Christ has dawned.

First, a little context. You maybe remember that in the Old Testament, after the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, called Judah. Although Isaiah lived in Judah and wrote primarily to the people of Judah, he was very aware of what was going the Kingdom to the north—and it wasn't good. By the time that Isaiah came on the scene, the spiritual state of Israel was basically a dumpster fire. The people had turned away from worshiping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and instead were worshiping the gods of the Canaanites, which were basically sex gods. For the Canaanites, “worship” consisted of sleeping with temple prostitutes, and the children produced by these illicit relationships were often thrown into the fire as sacrifices to the gods. The people of Israel were no longer content to listen to what God says in his Word, but instead were turning to fortune tellers and mediums who claimed that they could speak to the dead. Isaiah refers to them as *spiritists who whisper and mutter*. Or as the old King James Version put it, “*Wizards that peep*.” (Some of you may recognize that as the title of a book by Siegbert Becker about the Occult.) You add to that all that spiritual idolatry the political corruption that was running rampant in Israel and the way the poor were being trampled under the feet of the rich and you end up with a nation that was basically living in spiritual darkness.

Well, in the end, it was that spiritual darkness, that human depravity, that brought down God's wrath on the nation of Israel. And the instrument that God used to bring about the destruction of Israel was the nation of Assyria. The Assyrians were infamous for their violent, bloodthirsty tactics. They were basically the terrorists of Isaiah's day. They weren't content to just kill people. They would instead flay them alive. Or they would cut off people's heads and pile them up in a pyramid to let everyone know who was really in charge. Can you imagine?

Actually, maybe you can. In fact, maybe you see some parallels between life back then, and life today. I mean, you think about how our world continues to chase the gods of sex and money and political power. You think about how many babies, whether born or unborn, are being sacrificed on the altar of personal choice. You think about the horrific crimes that are committed against women and children and those who can't defend themselves. You think about the acts of terrorism still going on around the world. After 2,700 years, has anything really changed? Our world is still enveloped in spiritual darkness. And just like Wisconsin in the winter, our world can leave us feeling discouraged, depressed or even afraid. Recently, I had

someone ask me, “Seriously, why would anyone want to bring a child into this world? I mean, a world where children are now expected to decide what gender they are? A world where they will be judged by the color of their skin. If they're black, they'll be labeled as criminals. If they're white, they're labeled as privileged. Would anyone want to bring a child into a world where Biblical truth is now labelled as “hate speech”? All of this is evidence that we live in a world that is enveloped in darkness.

And what's worse is the fact that that darkness is not just out there. That darkness is also in here. Every one of us is born with a piece of that darkness inside of us. And that darkness shows itself when we try to hide our sins, when we cling to the darkness, when we kind of enjoy holding on to that lustful thought or that bitterness, or that juicy piece of gossip. My friends, it doesn't matter whether we are looking out the window or we're looking in the mirror, the fact is, there's a lot of darkness in and around us. And that darkness can really start to wear us down and leave us feeling afraid and alone, and wondering, “What's going to happen to us? What's going to happen to our loved ones? What's going to happen to our world?”

Tell me, is there a cure for all these emotions created by the darkness in and around us? Yes, there is. And it's simply this. Christian, Look to the Light. Here in our text, Isaiah tells us that while it's true that I. Darkness envelopes the world, it's also true that II. The Light of Christ has dawned. Isaiah puts it this way: *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the deep darkness, a light has dawned.*

Now someone might ask, what is this great light that the people have seen? This light that has now dawned? And how do we know that the prophet who lived 700 years before Christ is actually talking about Jesus? Well, two reasons. First, because only four verses later, the prophet goes on to describe that light in great detail. He says in the words that we read every Christmas, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.* (Notice, not a government, but the government. All earthly authority is ultimately under Christ's control.) *And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* There is only one person in the world who fills that bill, only one person who could make peace between a holy God and an unholy human race. And that's the God-man, Jesus Christ.

But there is also a second reason that we know that the light which has dawned is actually a reference to Jesus. It's found in the opening words of chapter 9 where Isaiah describes the effect that the light will have on a specific region of the world. Isaiah writes, *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor the Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan. (Isaiah 9:1)* Now, what does Isaiah mean by that? Where exactly is Zebulun and Naphtali? And what does it mean that God humbled them? Well, if you remember, Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the most northern tribes of the nation of Israel, right up there around the Sea of Galilee. That means that when the Assyrian armies invaded from the north, those two tribes were some of the first to get completely run over. They were the first to be enslaved and hauled off into captivity. That's how God humbled Zebulun and Naphtali.

But now jump ahead 700 years and that same area is now called what? That's right. It's called Galilee. And who was it that spent an awful lot of time in Galilee? Yes, Jesus of Nazareth! In fact in our gospel reading today, you heard St. Matthew tells us why Jesus spent time in Galilee. Matthew writes, *Leaving Nazareth, (Jesus) went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in*

*the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:13-16)*

My friends, you realize that those words apply to more than just the people who lived up in Galilee. Those words apply to you and me as well. Why do I say that? Because we are the ones who are still living “in the land of the shadow of death”. As sinful human beings, we live in a nation where the mortality rate is still 100%. We know why that is. It’s because, as St. Paul writes, *the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)*. We know that’s what we deserve from an just and holy God. But by the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I also know the rest of the story. We know that God did to rescue us from eternal death. He sent his Son to die in our place, to take away the sting of death and give us a life that never ends. In that way, Jesus became our Life and our Light. Or as Isaiah says, *“A light has dawned.”*

Do you realize what that means? It means that even when things look bleak, even when there seems to be more and more darkness in our world, the fact is, we still have hope. We have hope because Jesus is the one who pushes back the darkness. Just like when you’re out camping and you finally get that Coleman lantern lit and it drives back the darkness so that you can see things that were not visible to you before, so Jesus is the Light that allows us to see things we couldn’t see before. In the light of Jesus, we see that God has taken our sins and sunk them to the bottom of the sea. In the light of Jesus, we see that there is no force of evil that he has not already overcome. In the light of Jesus, we see that even the hardest things we face in life are still circumstances used by God to draw us closer to himself. In the light of Jesus, we see that even death becomes the means for God to take us out of this world, to himself in heaven.

My friends, whether we're talking about the challenge of living in Wisconsin in the middle of winter and we're talking about the challenge of living as Christians in a world that's growing increasingly more godless, the fact is, the Light makes all the difference in the world. The next time you're feeling stressed by the darkness you see in the world, or the darkness you see in your heart, then look to the Light, the Light of Christ. Soak up his love for you. Bask in his gift of full and free forgiveness. Let his promise to never leave or forsake you take away your fear of being alone. Let his promise to never give you more than you can handle give you courage to face the future.

And as you let his light shine on you, then you will be able to reflect that light toward others. Show Jesus’ love in your actions. Treat others not as they deserve, but as Jesus treated you. For in that way, you show them what the Light of Christ looks like. How did Jesus put it? *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)*

Let's face it, we live in a world that is enveloped in darkness. But that doesn't mean we have no hope. Our hope is found not in what we can do to change the world. Our hope is found in what Christ has done to change us. Christ’s life and death in our place has changed our lives, for time and for eternity. No matter where you are in your life. No matter what doubts or fears or worries you may have about tomorrow, God's invitation to you is clear: Look to the Light. Trust in the Light. Walk in the Light. For as Jesus himself once said, *“I am the light of the world. whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (John 8:12)* Believe it, and live it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.