



WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

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Isaiah 9:1-7

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Moments before our Sunday morning service last week, as we were preparing to open the service by singing carols in celebration of the joy of Christmas, Terry Yordan, one of our Sunday School teachers, came by with a prayer request. Tearfully, she told us that an eight-year-old boy, one of her pupils at a local grade school where she teaches, had died during the week. The boy had undergone voluntary plastic surgery, and things had gone well, but a couple of days later, complications set in and he died. I was already grieving for little Timothy Lindholm, the seven-year-old son of Greg and Dawn Lindholm, who at that moment was lying in a coma, close to death. (Timothy died later that week.) I was forced to ask myself, What does the joy of Christmas really amount to in the face of such tragedies? Should we just go ahead and fake our joy, as if Christmas were a divine joke? But how can we continue with the old traditions — close family times, warm fires, good food, and “joy to the world” — when Christmas so often is accompanied by tragedy, sorrow and disappointment?

As I thought about these matters during the past few days, the Scriptures have greatly comforted my soul. I feel we tend to take the message of Christmas out of its true context. When we do this, we misunderstand its meaning and, as a consequence, fail to grasp its true joy.

A glance at the situation in Bethlehem on that first Christmas morning makes it obvious that joy was birthed in the midst of great grief and distress. While the angels were rejoicing at the birth of Mary's son, and announcing “peace on earth” to the shepherds, a paranoid ruler named Herod was preparing to slaughter every male infant under two years of age in Bethlehem. While Mary was rejoicing, every mother in that city was weeping, fulfilling the word of the prophet Jeremiah, “Rachel is weeping for her children...because they are no more” (Jer 31:15).

What was the significance of that first Christmas for these mourning women who had seen their little sons put to the sword? To find the answer to this question, I want to look this morning at one of the original announcements of Christmas. In these words, taken from the opening verses of the ninth chapter of Isaiah's prophecy, written 700 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah declares that while the birth of the Christ-child would be an occasion for great joy and celebration, its original announcement was made in the context of grief and anguish.

In the opening verses of our text, we learn of the geographical location of the joy that we celebrate at this time of year.

I. The Place of Joy (9:1-2)

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people walking in darkness

**Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them. (NASB)**

(a) A Land of Gloom and Darkness

At the time of Isaiah's writing, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the tribes of Northern Israel (located in the region of Galilee) were living in gloom and anguish. They were suffering the effects of God's terrible contempt for their long-standing sins of idolatry, immorality and injustice, because God in judgment had handed them over to the wicked Assyrians, the cruelest people on the face of the earth.

World domination was the goal of these tyrannical Assyrians. They had a standing army of mercenaries, men who were prepared to subdue with merciless ferocity any potential foe. Earlier, in chapter 5 of his prophecy, Isaiah paints a sobering picture of these fierce warriors:

**He lifts up a banner for the distant nations,
He whistles for those at the ends of the earth.
Here they come, swiftly and speedily!
Not one of them grows tired or stumbles,
not one slumbers or sleeps;
not a belt is loosened at the waist,
not a sandal thong is broken.
Their arrows are sharp, all their bows are strung;
their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
Their chariot wheels like a whirlwind
Their roar is like that of the lion,
they roar like young lions;
they growl as they seize their prey
and carry it off with no one to rescue. (Isaiah 5:26-29, NIV)**

The Assyrians had adopted the practice of exiling captive peoples from their homelands. The result was that these conquered peoples became disoriented, and they abandoned hope of ever being repatriated. The violence of the Assyrians knew no bounds. They cruelly demoralized and intimidated their captives by impaling some of them on stakes, and the rebellious they skinned alive before the eyes of their own families.

This text from chapter 7 of Isaiah alludes to Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria, and his campaign against Israel in 733 BC. This powerful king conquered Galilee, Gilead, and the coast regions. He reorganized these areas into Assyrian provinces, renaming them according to their respective capitals: Megiddo, which included Galilee and the Northern Plains; Dor, comprising the Sharon Plain as far as the Philistine border; and Gilead, corresponding to the Israelite Transjordan. These areas were completely cut off from the rest of the kingdom of Israel and assimilated into the Assyrian empire. The archaeologist and historian, Yohanan Aharoni, captures the destruction of these regions in his book, *The Land*:

Hazor...the greatest defense post and chariot city in the north, excavation at Hazor reveal that the town was completely de-

stroyed in this period. The buildings and the fort on top of the tell were burned, and the town which arose on its ruins was only a poor unwallled village. This actually brings to an end the history of Hazor as a city. At Megiddo the destruction was also complete. The entire town was laid waste, including the large royal structures such as the storehouses, the palace and the gate. Over the ruins a new town was constructed according to an entirely different plan. Typical of Assyrian plan, the city became the Assyrian capital of the province and was occupied by the governor, a military garrison and the local administrative staff.

Thus it was to these enslaved Israelites, ravaged by a merciless enemy, cut off from their own people, assimilated among the Assyrians, and left to walk in gloom and darkness, that this message of the forthcoming birth of the Messiah was announced. To such people, sinners who were bitterly aware of their own shortcomings, overtaken and enslaved by sin, cut off from their fellow-countrymen, alone, and without hope, that Isaiah brought this message, “*there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish.*”

And these lands, which in earlier times God had treated with contempt, would be made glorious, according to the prophet.

(b) He Will Make Glorious

**...by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles.**

These anguished people would see a “great light” (2a). God would shine his light on them, searching for them in the midst of their terrible darkness. God had come looking for them. Galilee of the Gentiles, once trodden under foot by the Gentiles, would now become a place of light for the Gentiles. Matthew tells us in his gospel that this was the reason Jesus began his ministry in Naphtali, in Capernaum, “by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.” Lives that were ravaged by sin would become a source of light for others.

The verses of my favorite Christmas carol, *O come, O come, Emmanuel*, were taken right from this text in Isaiah:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.*

*O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Galilee of the Gentiles, therefore, would become the place of joy, according to these opening verses.

Next, we come to the reasons for this joy.

II. The Reasons For Joy (9:3-4)

**You shall multiply the nation,
You shall increase their gladness,
They will be glad in your presence
as with the gladness of harvest,
Just as they rejoice in the dividing of the spoil. (9:3)**

Notice the repetition of the word “gladness” in these verses. I am reminded of the repetition of a phrase in another favorite carol, *Joy to the World*:

*Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

There would be good reason for gladness, says the prophet. It would be because the circumstances that were causing the captives to be fearful would be done away with. God would deal with the two things that caused them the greatest pain. They feared loss of life, but there would be abundance of life; and they feared they would be spoil for the enemy, but they themselves would end up dividing the spoil.

(a) For Abundance of Life!

Their intense joy would be like a harvest (“gladness of harvest”) that would be rich beyond their wildest expectations. The prophet Amos describes this scene by saying that in that day, the harvest would be so rich that the ploughman, preparing the fields for the next crop, would overtake the reaper, who had not yet completed harvesting the previous year’s crop. Jesus used the same imagery when he told his disciples in John 4, on the occasion when the Samaritans were coming to him following his encounter with the woman at the well: “lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest.”

The captives feared loss of life but, says the prophet, but they would have an abundance of life, and this would transform their grief into joy.

A second thing, freedom from tyranny, would also make them joyful.

(b) For Freedom From Tyranny (9:4-5)

**For You shall break the yoke of their burden and
the staff on their shoulders,
The rod of their oppressor,
as at the battle of Midian.**

**For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult,
And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the
fire.**

They would be liberated from slavery, tyranny and oppression. And God would accomplish this in the same way that Gideon defeated the Midianites. Gideon used only a remnant of his fighting force, and instead of conventional weapons used candles set in clay pots, trumpets, and a shout of victory to confuse the Midianites so that they attacked each other and ended up destroying themselves.

When this happens, says the prophet, there would be no remnant of the enemy’s arsenal remaining. The tromping boots and the cloaks filled with blood would be fuel for the fire, precluding any chance for a revival among the enemy.

And the captives, far from being the spoil, would themselves rejoice in dividing the spoil. There would be an abundance of things they didn’t work for — vineyards, homes, etc. — for them to divide. In the same way, God today divides the spoils with Christians. These spoils are our spiritual gifts, unconventional weapons which he grants us so that we might bring resurrection life in our communities.

So we have seen the place of joy and the reasons for joy.

Finally, we come to the object of our joy.

III. The Object of Our Joy: A Child (9:6-7)

**For a child will be born to us,
A son will be given to us.**

**And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And his name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.**

Notice how these lines build in majesty and intensity concerning this one who was to come. The first line declares that a child was to come; the second, that the child was a son; the third, that the son would be a king; and the fourth, that this king would do God's work. Child—>son—>King—>God!

(a) A Growing Awareness of the Identity of the Child

All of these things which would bring gladness to the captives would come, not from a tyrant, but through a Child who was going to play all the strings of government on earth.

And notice that this one is referred to as a "son," inferring, in the language of the OT, that he would be a king. "The government will rest on his shoulders," says verse 6, responding to verse 4, the promise that God would "break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders."

So the names given by Isaiah to this one who was to come are all names for God. This King, although a man, would do God's work.

According to one medieval scholar, the Jews explained away this text by applying all of these names, except the last one, to God. The last name, "Prince of Peace," they applied to King Hezekiah. So they translate the text thus: "And (he who is) wonderful, the counselor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, calls his name (i.e. Hezekiah) the Prince of Peace." These names are not used of Hezekiah, however, but of the child who was to come. And each name involves divine work; none of them may be applied to the work of man.

(b) A Growing Appreciation for the Ministry of the Child

The title "Wonderful Counselor," of course, does not refer to someone who sits in an office and imparts wisdom to deal with problems that are shared. Rather, this title refers to one who has insight, who knows what to do, and is able to successfully implement his plan. And his success evokes awe and wonder in beholders, the same responses which the captives felt following the miracles of the Exodus, when God led his people out of Egypt. The word "wonder" is never used in Scripture to refer to man's work, but rather as a response to insoluble problems which are beyond man's capabilities. The Savior would have an even greater task to accomplish than the liberation of the Jews from Egypt, and the way he would do it would evoke awe and wonder on every hand.

"Wonderful Counselor" calls to mind the words of the third verse of *O come, O come, Emmanuel*:

*O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things, far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

The occasion of my oldest daughter's 16th birthday last week evoked awe and wonder in our home as we recalled again the story of how we adopted her. Sixteen years ago, my infant daughter Jessica died, six days following her birth. But God in his grace overruled our grief and turned our gloom and anguish into gladness. The miracles he did during those days, just before Christmas, will forever cause me to stand in awe and wonder at

his love. When Jessica died on December 4th, Emily and I began to pray that God would bless us with an adopted child. We decided this time to leave the baby furniture in the room we had prepared. Two days later, during a Body Life service at PBC, a woman prayed that we would have a baby by Christmas. Sitting in the service that evening was a young woman whose girlfriend was due to give birth within a matter of days. This girl, she told us, was going to give up her baby for adoption, although she had not told her doctor she was going to do so. Next day, we learned that she was going to give her baby to us. Two weeks later, Becky was born, on December 18th, one week before Christmas. The time between our losing Jessica and adopting Becky was so short that my wife was even able to nurse Becky. Our Wonderful Counselor had blessed us in an awe-inspiring way, doing something that we will remember forever.

The second title here, *Mighty God*, is literally, "God-warrior." This word is used 156 times in the OT of the heroes and champions among God's holy army. For instance, it was used of David's three mighty warriors who broke through the Philistine lines to bring him water from Bethlehem. This valorous warrior King of Isaiah 9 would have all the resources of God to bring about salvation for his people, so there would be no difference between God and him.

The third title, *Eternal Father*, literally reads, "my Father forever." God is forever our Father. But how can we refer to the Son as the Father? Jesus tells us how in these words, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." When you see this King for who he is, you will be drawn right into the Father's heart. And this Wonderful Counselor, this Mighty God, never changes his demeanor after his task has been completed. Following the battle, he comes home to his own because he has a fatherly tenderness and compassion for those he loves.

Finally, as the *Prince of Peace*, he accomplished all of this without as much as firing a shot. Isn't that amazing? The Prince of Peace directed all the violent forces of hell against himself, and he paid the supreme sacrifice. He did not build his empire through oppression or war. And he refuses to coerce his way into hearts. He knocks on the door, and waits for it to open. If you do not open the door — if there is no room in your inn — then he will sleep in a cave. When he came face to face with his time to die, there was no place in the city where he could utilize his unconventional weapon — his own death — so he went outside the city to die. May we who partake in his reign learn from his wonderful example: let us not take up the weapons of the world and make his sacrifice an unholy act.

There may be a hint here that because this one is the Prince of Peace, he alone has the right to build God's temple. David wanted to do this, but he could not because his hands were defiled by blood. But this King would be the temple-builder. Through love and peace he would set every living stone in its proper place.

*O come, Desire of nation's bind,
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease,
Fill all the world with heaven's peace.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!*

How long will this joy last? you ask. Isaiah gives a three-part answer.

IV. The Permanence of Our Joy (9:7)

**There will be no end to the increase
of His government or of peace,**

**On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore,
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.**

Because of the permanent reign of this king, our joy too will be progressive, permanent, and perpetual.

(a) Progressive

His reign would have small beginnings, but it would grow until it had no end. It would spread from Bethlehem, to Galilee, to Antioch, to Asia Minor, to Rome — to the whole world. Why will our gladness (v 3) keep growing? It is because the reign of this king will keep growing.

(b) Permanent

This last Davidic King will found his throne on justice and righteousness, and no power will ever be able to overthrow it, unlike Israel's former kings.

(c) Perpetual

And his reign will extend "From then on and forevermore." It will carry over into the next age of the New Heavens and New Earth.

In case any doubt remains, Isaiah ends with a statement that is used only three times in the OT: "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this," says the prophet. "Lord of hosts" means "Lord of armies." The Lord has at his disposal three kinds of armies. He has creation itself — the stars, the elements, hail, rain, snow, etc. And he has all national armies at his call. No matter whether they are Christian or pagan, all military powers are at his disposal. Furthermore, he has the angelic armies at his beck and call. Isaiah is saying that all of the Lord's passionate zeal, together with all of his resources as Commander-in-Chief, backs the reign of this King. Have you noticed that all three of these armies worked together to put into effect God's plan at the birth of Jesus? God used the Roman government's census to ensure that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, thus fulfilling prophecy. A star in the heavens guided the wise men to the Christ-child. And God had the angels direct the shepherds to the child, and lead the heavenly choirs in songs of praise at the birth of the Messiah.

So we see in this wonderful text, written 700 years before the birth of Christ, that the announcement of gladness and deliverance at the news of his birth was made at a time when gloom and anguish were the lot of the captive Israelites. And it is very important to notice this: grief is not done away with by the birth of this Deliverer, but it is transcended by it.

Last week, I saw a signal example of this truth. I saw a couple walk in darkness, gloom and anguish, but as they placed their faith in the government of the Child born in Bethlehem, their grief was transcended. Like Sarah and Abraham, they ascended Mount Moriah in obedience to the divine call. They could do this because they were trusting in the reign of this King who is no tyrant. He himself was once a child, and if this was their chosen lot, the promise would yet prove true, that "weeping may last through the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning." A Christian mother of nine children, two of whom had died and another was even at that moment fighting for his life in the same hospital, entered that hospital room and said to Tim's mother, Dawn, "We are chosen women." They both had a transcendent sense of peace because of the reign of this King. At the end, Dawn and Greg lauded the Christ-child with even more honor than the wise men, because their offering was infinitely more valuable than gold, frankincense and myrrh. They laid their son on the altar, giving pure thanksgiving to God for his short life.

In that hospital room, I watched as the unconventional weapons of the Savior, the weapons of weakness and death, created a harvest of life. People kept coming from all over to keep vigil, as the same orchestration of life that was manifested at the first advent was taking place again. God was pulling the strings of heaven and of earth as worshipers came to pay homage to the significance of a little boy and to worship at his bedside.

As we sang around his bed, I heard the angels singing the ancient song, "O God, our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." The Light shone on us who were living in the shadow of death. It was Emmanuel, God with us. That hospital room was flooded with heavenly rays, and for a brief moment we were able to peer over the horizon to catch a glimpse of the City of God.

And when Timothy left, I beheld the love that unites the City of God. The light of morning dawned and filled his mother's eyes, and as she cradled her son, I saw the gaze of Mary as she beheld her Son before she laid him to rest.

No, friends. Christmas is not a divine joke. As I left the hospital, weeping, in my spirit I was singing praise to our Wonderful Counselor, our Mighty God, our Father Forever, the Prince of Peace. It is he who has defeated death, the greatest tyrant of all. What a comfort it is to know that Timothy, once a boy, is now reigning with the Kings of Kings, "*whom shepherds guard and angels sing.*" Amen.

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