

“Wonderful Counselor”

Isaiah 9:1-7

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I grew up in a family of five boys, two of them adopted. We could get pretty rowdy, but what really made things wild sometimes were when my cousins visited. They had three boys themselves, and they were crazy. The parents would want to spend time talking, so they would hang out in the other part of the house. The boys would be off in the family room or a bedroom, beating up on each other. Usually something like a lamp would end up broken. Usually, I was relieved when a parent would hear us and come in to restore order. My dad knew how to sort things out and establish peace!

If you spend any time looking at the news, that can really discourage you about the world. Sometimes you wonder if anyone really wants peace and justice for all people, or if everybody just wants to get what they can for themselves. It's hard sometimes, living as we do in this present darkness.

But Isaiah tells us in his prophesy that God comes into this world of war and darkness. That's why this season is called Advent because it means the Coming, the coming of Jesus.

Our passage breaks into two sections. The first one talks about the coming of the *coming* of the Messiah, in verses 1 to 5, and the *character* of the Messiah, in verses 6 and 7. The point is, do you long for peace in the world? Do you want to see the coming of a new time where there's justice for the nations? That's a vision so big we hardly even dare pray for it. But it's what's coming in Jesus.

I think it helps us understand what Isaiah is doing if we think about the role of prophet. We need to understand that prophet did both “forth-telling” and “foretelling.”

Fore-telling is when the prophet predicts the future.

It was looking ahead at what God was going to do. God gave those predictions many times in the Old Testament, when he told about Jesus, the Messiah who would enter into the world to save it.

Micah said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)

Isaiah said the Messiah would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14).

Moses said the Messiah would be prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15).

David said the Messiah would be rejected by his own people (Psalm 118:22)

Isaiah said the Messiah would be tried and condemned (Isaiah 53:8), would be mocked and spat on by his enemies (50:6), would suffer with criminals and pray for his enemies (Isaiah 53:12).

David said the Messiah would die on a cross (Psalm 22:14, 16, 17), that people would cast lots for his clothes (Psalm 22:18), that God would raise him from the dead (Psalm 16:10), and that he's now at God's right hand (Psalm 110:1).

That's fore-telling, saying ahead of time what God's going to do. It's a part of what the Old Testament prophets did.

Forth-telling is when the prophet challenges Israel to live by God's teachings.

Predicting the future isn't the only thing prophets did. A lot of their speaking was calling people to live up to God's teaching, his claim on his people. It's saying we have to do what God wants us to do. In that way, it was kind of like preaching.

There's one more thing to notice about the prophecy of Israel. It often had both an immediate and a long-term fulfillment about it. So, when Isaiah talks about the nations coming to the mountain of God, it's a picture of how God would forgive his people and bring them back from exile 70 years later, and it's also a picture of the resurrection in the age to come.

That even happens in Jesus' teaching ministry. During the last week of his earthly career, he predicts the destruction of Jerusalem. In the short-term, that was fulfilled less than 40 years later when the Romans crushed Judea. But the prophecy is also about the end of the world and Jesus' coming again in glory.

It's like that with Advent, the preparation for Christmas, too. Advent helps us anticipate and prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, even though it's a historical event that's already taken place. But it also helps us to look forward to the day Jesus comes back glory to judge the world, our great hope.

So, let's look at today's scripture in its two sections.

First, the coming of the Messiah (9:1-5)

Our world always seems to be in conflict. Isaiah's world was too. The people felt the gloom and despair, and longed for peace to reign. Isaiah says that would come with the Messiah. In the past, the Lord taught the northern tribes Zebulun and Naphtali a hard lesson. But in the future he would honor the north. Why? That's Galilee of the Gentiles, the place the Jews looked down on as less spiritual than Judea.

It's there the light would dawn. It's into the worst places God comes to bring life and hope, prosperity and peace. It's why the prophet Malachi says

"The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings" (4:2).

The people of the north suffered so much, and now they have the best news possible. Like John says,

"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world"
(John 1:9).

There's one more thing to notice. The sentences are past tense. The prophet was seeing from God's perspective. He was so sure about the prophecy, that nothing could be done to alter it,

that he saw it as already accomplished. Since God gave him the vision, it was as good as done. All he had to do was wait for it.

So “light” will shine on people who were walking in “darkness.” Matthew understood how Isaiah was looking fore-telling Jesus’ ministry in the north. He writes,

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he left Judea and returned to Galilee. But instead of going to Nazareth, he went to Capernaum, beside the Sea of Galilee, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy:

‘In the land of Zebulun and of Naphtali, beside the sea, beyond the Jordan River—in Galilee where so many Gentiles live—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow, a light has shined.’

From then on, Jesus began to preach, ‘Turn from your sins and turn to God, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near’” (Matthew 4:12-17).

The Character of the Messiah

Jesus is the true light of the world. He brings grace and truth to a world that needs it, and his reign is going to be a reign of justice and peace for all. His coming is what ends the despair, the gloom.

What does the light chasing away the darkness mean? For one thing, it means prosperity. That is, the past mean humbling, hard lessons from God. But now, there would be joy and prosperity, or victory. It was a look at the time of peace and righteousness in the coming of the Messiah.

The picture Isaiah uses is like the joy at the harvest time. The harvest was a celebration of God’s blessing after the long, hard work in the fields. The harvest is a picture of the coming of the Lord. It’s thanksgiving.

The other picture Isaiah uses is that it’s like dividing the plunder after a battle. After the battle, the winners divide up the spoils of war. The Lord will bring a time when he breaks the oppression of all our enemies. And this is the victory of all victories—the weapons of war will be burnt. This isn’t just a temporary peace, but it’s forever—war will end. Like Isaiah says in chapter two, “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:6). Jesus will win the victory, and he’ll bring in an age of peace.

How can that ever happen in our world? Only one way. It’s because of the character of the Messiah who brings in the reign of peace. Now Isaiah turns to introduce the only one who can make it happen. Let’s take a look at just one aspect of his character:

He is Wonderful.

In the ancient Middle East, kings took throne names and titles to show who they were. We see the titles given to King David,

the man exalted by the Most High,

the man anointed by the God of Jacob,
Israel's singer of songs

But there's nothing like the names for Jesus.

The first name is Wonderful Counselor. "Wonderful" isn't like we use it, that basically means "nice." In the Bible, it's a word that usually describes the Lord. It means extraordinary, marvelous, miraculous, surpassing, great—like when David meditates on the knowledge of God, and he says,

"Such knowledge is too *wonderful* for me" (Psalm 139:6).

Or when an angel tells Abraham "Is anything too *hard* for the Lord?"
(Genesis 18:14)

The word we translate "hard" is actually "wonderful," or extraordinary, marvelous. It means the Messiah is the supernatural one, the one who shares all the attributes of the Lord.

He is the Counselor

The second part of the name is "counselor." It means, "the one who plans," or "advises." It means he has the wisdom to rule. In chapter 11, Isaiah says this king, this Immanuel, or God with us, has the Spirit of Counsel. It means his wisdom to rule comes from God.

Jesus' wisdom and his teaching showed he was the great counselor—his wisdom was from God. Like when the woman at the well in John 4 heard him, she told her friends,

"Come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (John 4:29).

No one ever spoke like Jesus did. And he speaks still today, because he promised to send another counselor, the Holy Spirit, who still teaches us by his Word.

So, complete peace and justice come with the reign of Jesus, who is the Christ, our Messiah, the Lord, because he has the perfect wisdom to rule, to hold together the universe. He brings the righteousness that the world longs for. He rules with wisdom because he is the King who is a Wonderful Counselor.

God did not abandon his people, but he came in the birth of Jesus to bless and to save. And that's his promise for us, too. So, when we prepare for Christmas, we remember his first coming, and to look for his Second Coming in glory. But what do we do when we have a hard time seeing? Sometimes it's hard enough to see what God's doing here and now, let alone have a vision for the day he comes and makes all things right.

Pastor Tod Bolsinger tells about two men in his church, both widowers. One of them named Hal is blind. The other named Gus is in a wheelchair. Hal can't see and Gus can't walk, but together they can get where they need to go, each giving something the other needs.

Sometimes we need eyes to see, and even if we have resources to share, we lose our vision. And sometimes when we have the vision to see where we need to go, but we feel empty, with nothing left to share. We need each other. To let Hal and Gus lead the way.

God helps us to do that. He has both the vision and the resources. He is great, and his plans are perfect. We can trust the future to Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor. He has the wisdom to sort out our lives, and to establish his peace.