

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, we confess our sins to You, partly in sorrow because of our failures, and partly in thankfulness because of the privilege of our salvation obtained by Jesus. But You are a God who constantly offers forgiveness to those who turn to You, and we ask for this blessing. Renewed, may we face the challenges of living in this beautiful yet troubled world, and grow in maturity into people who demonstrate the godliness of holy living. Thank You for Your redeeming grace Lord God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: FARMING

1. ***For yourself***
2. ***For your friends and family***
3. ***For the church and its work***
4. ***For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)***

Meditation

Lord God, challenge me to grow in spirit
Show me how salvation can move my soul

Colour my life with visions of Your glory
And use me to paint faith's vibrant pictures

Set my emotions free to bless and not curse
And liberate my feelings to love and be loved

Grant me the strength to be a challenge to evil
And protect my family from all the devil's wiles

Provide me with the courage to use all wisdom
And open my mind to embrace deeper truths

Lord God, challenge me to accept Your guidance
And may I discover the great privilege of obedience

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 9:1-7

¹ Nevertheless, there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In previous times he brought contempt on the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but later, he will give honour to 'the Way of the Sea', to the regions beyond the Jordan, and to Galilee of the Gentiles.

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land shadowed by death,
a light has shined on them.

- ³ You have multiplied the rejoicing;
 and increased the joy;
 they rejoice before you
 like rejoicing at harvest-time;
 as they rejoice when dividing the spoil.
- ⁴ For the yoke of his burden,
 the staff for his shoulder,
 the rod of his oppressor,
 you shattered as on the day of Midian.
- ⁵ For every boot tramped in battle tumult
 and every garment rolled in blood
 will be burned as fuel for the fire.
- ⁶ For a child is born for us,
 a Son is given for us;
 Authority will rest on His shoulders,
 and He will be named:
 Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- ⁷ Of the profuse growth
 of his rule and of peace,
 there will be no end
 for the throne of David,
 and for His kingdom.
 He will establish it and confirm it
 by justice and righteousness
 from now onwards and forevermore.
 The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Review

Suddenly, out of the turmoil of Isaiah's previous experiences with king Ahab and the rejection of his prophecies, Isaiah's inspiration rises to an astonishing spiritual height. He returns, characteristically, to his previous theme of hope for God's people (see chapter 4); but here, there is so much more. Light replaces dark (9:2), the burden of oppression is shattered (9:4,5), God provides His Saviour by the birth of a child (9:6), and a new Kingdom will be established for God's people!

With these words, Isaiah continues to declare hope to God's wayward people. The Lord Himself acts in justice and mercy, because only he can do this and establish a new future in which everything is changed. In Isaiah's previous prophecies (chapters 7 and 8), he used the names of children to indicate the Lord's intentions, speaking dramatically of the birth of 'Immanuel', meaning 'God with us' (7:14). Now, in this spectacular text, Isaiah's prophecies reveal remarkably that the child to be born will be a perfect and godly King for the throne of David (9:7)! Unlike the fading glories of Jerusalem and Judah, the Kingdom of this King would have 'no end'.

This whole magnificent prophecy takes the world of Isaiah and all that was happening at that time to Israel, Judah and Jerusalem, and transports us forward to a time when the Lord acts in mercy and judgement to resolve the ruinous mess made by God's sinful people. In retrospect, we can immediately appreciate that this prophecy speaks of the work of Jesus Christ and the eternal plan of God for the redemption of all who trust in Him. It hardly gets better than this in the Old Testament!

When this passage is read in church, people often miss out verses 3, 4 and 5, because they contain references to war. However, we have seen that everything in Isaiah is set against the backdrop of the impending disaster of war due to the ill-conceived foreign policies of King Ahaz (7:1-9). Faced with the threat of invasion and disaster, Isaiah prophesied that a small faithful remnant of God's people would survive; God's judgement would indeed come on His people, but those who remained faithful would be transformed! This is what is meant by the dramatic opening verse of our passage (9:1). Isaiah saw a time coming when God would bless His people from the farthest reaches of greater Israel, and bring light into the darkness (9:2). This transformation is a major theme in Isaiah, and is picked up by Jesus (John 3:19), and almost all the New Testament writers, Paul (Rom 13:12, 2 Cor 4:6), Peter (1 Peter 2:9) and John (1 John 1:5; 2:8,9). In every instance of its use, the change of darkness to light describes the powerful work of God to redeem His people; and it was first prophesied by Isaiah.

At this point in the prophecy we do not know how God will bring about this change, but Isaiah builds our anticipation by talk of 'multiplied rejoicing' and 'increasing' joy' (9:3), and by describing the defeat of all God's enemies (9:4,5). How could all this happen, we are tempted to ask, and who can achieve it? At the climax of the prophecy, Isaiah announces that this will come about through the birth of a child who will not only have all the qualities of his ancestor David, but also some qualities which can only be described as divine; he will be 'Mighty God', 'Everlasting Father', and 'Prince of Peace' (9:6). Incredibly, Isaiah described the birth of a child who would become the true King of God's people and also the fulfilment of his earlier prophecy, 'God with us!' Isaiah does not make direct mention of Immanuel here, but this prophecy is surely an extension of what he said earlier (7:14).

The combination of human and divine properties for the child to be born is a unique prophecy of God's work of salvation. God reveals through Isaiah the establishment of a new Kingdom in justice and righteousness, and we stand in awe of this vision of what we now know as the Kingdom of God as established by Jesus!

Going Deeper

This is only to scratch the surface of this amazing passage. We will now go on to look at more of the details of the text, but books could be written on these words, and have been. To begin with, I will explain the reasons for the translation I have given which may read differently to the versions with which you are familiar. After that, we will look at the 'remnant' of God's people described in the first three verses, and then at more of the details of the great verses 6 and 7.

Notes on the text and translation

- 9:1 *My translation in this verse '... for those who were in anguish' is not exactly the same as the Hebrew, which is singular, 'for her who was in anguish'. However, 'her' probably refers to the 'remnant'; those who were left in Judah who looked for the coming of the Lord.*
- 9:1 *It is not always clear in translations, that all three regions mentioned at the end are to be honoured; 'the Way of the Sea', the regions beyond the Jordan, and Galilee of the Gentiles.*
- 9:3 *Most translations begin this verse 'you have multiplied the nation ...' but in so doing leave out a couple of Hebrew consonants in the text which appear to be in the wrong place. It is easy to work out how the whole text comes together to make 'you have multiplied the rejoicing' (see Word Biblical Commentary – John Watts).*
- 9:5 *Isaiah takes the image of the fire of God's judgement, and describes it as fuelled by the trappings of war.*
- 9:6 *We are used to the phrase 'the government will be on His shoulders ...' but the word for government means 'rule', 'authority', or 'dominion'. I have chosen 'authority'. Essentially, it means 'authority to act'.*
- 9:7 *The verse begins, literally, 'to the abundance, to the abundance of His rule', which I have taken as meaning some kind of continual growth.*
- 9:7 *The punctuation of verse 7 is quite unclear. I have put it together in a way which makes most sense of the words as they stand.*

The remnant who receive God's salvation

In the Hebrew, the end of chapter 8 flows into chapter 9, indicating a strong link between the two passages. This confirms the idea that the prophecies in this part of Isaiah, certainly from chapter 6 onwards, were revealed consecutively. For this reason, it is likely that our text today was spoken to the same group of faithful people Isaiah addressed in chapter 8; people who Isaiah would later call a 'remnant' (10:19f.; 11:11; 14:22f.; 28:5 etc.). Through revelation, Isaiah spoke about things which would have seemed incredible to those who heard him speaking. However, the words of encouragement and redemption in this great passage were obviously addressed to more than this small group. Isaiah revealed that faithful individuals were not only to be found in Jerusalem, but in the farthest reaches of the northern Kingdom of Israel (and remember, it was Israel and its King Pekah who were causing most of the trouble in Isaiah's day – 7:1-9), even though the Lord had contempt for what the northern nation of Israel had done (9:1). Even Gentiles were included in the vision; and for a traditional Jew, what Isaiah said was virtually heretical!

For this reason when Isaiah prophesied 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light', he was talking about all people who sought the Lord. Certainly, the faithful people of Jerusalem felt as if they were being dragged through dark times; perhaps they recited David's great Psalm 'The Lord is my Shepherd' (Ps 23) for comfort, for when Isaiah said 'a land shadowed by death' (9:2) he used the same word meaning 'shadow of death' found in Psalm 23 (v.4). Isaiah more than any of the prophets talks about the way people of the whole world are of concern to God (see also 42:6, 49:6). This is why it makes sense for the text of

verse 3 to talk about ever increasing joy and rejoicing, even including the idea of 'harvest' (9:3), and amazingly, the end of war (sharing out the spoil – 9:3).

'A child is born ... a Son is given.'

The last two verses of this text have been treasured by Christians for centuries. In recent times scholars have tried to concentrate on what these words may have meant to people in Isaiah's day as if to separate this from their fulfilment in Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. I am not sure this is possible. We cannot go back to find out exactly how people in Isaiah's day responded to this prophecy, and it is quite possible they did not entirely understand it. They may have struggled to put together everything Isaiah plainly said; that the well-known idea of God working through the coming of a child into the world to be 'with us' (7:14) would result in a king who was not just better than Ahaz or any other king, but one who had the qualities of God Himself and whose Kingdom, unlike Israel and Judah, would flourish eternally! How could Isaiah talk about a child born who also had the attributes of God? To them it may well have seemed like a tantalising mystery, but one which nevertheless spoke to their desire for deliverance and their trust in God.

For us who have been used to the idea that humanity and divinity go hand in hand in the person of Jesus Christ, these words describe Him alone and some of His amazing qualities. He holds authority (9:6) as our King in the line of David, which means that He is the fulfilment of the covenant God made with David (2 Sam 7:12f.) that through Him He would establish an eternal Kingdom (9:7), of peace, justice and righteousness. He is named in this prophecy with four incredible and revealing double titles; 'Wonderful Counsellor', 'Mighty God', 'Everlasting Father', 'Prince of Peace'. Each title is fascinating and to a certain extent self explanatory, but each word has a history in scripture which can be tracked to lead us into further understanding. Most fascinating of all, these four features of the revelation of God in Christ can be considered as illustrating the same qualities as the four Gospels;

The 'Wonderful Counsellor' is one who serves others, as is Jesus in Mark's Gospel

The 'Mighty God' is one who is divine, as is said of Jesus repeatedly in John's Gospel

The 'Everlasting Father' is a kingly authority figure, as is Jesus of Matthew's Gospel

The 'Prince of Peace' is the One who heals people, as Jesus does in Luke's Gospel

You may feel that this is a little forced, but the identification of the four Gospels as representing Jesus as both a servant and a king, and both human and divine is well established and goes back to the days of the early church and links with other important scriptures such as Ezekiel 1. This understanding of Jesus through the Gospels cannot easily be put to one side, and it is astonishing that it is reflected even in a small way in this great prophecy of Isaiah. Each characteristic of God's promised Deliverer is one which is explored fully in both the Old and the New Testaments.

Discipleship

Application

Few people of faith who read these words will be left unmoved by them, and each of us can allow our minds to work on almost any aspect of the text; light out of darkness in (9:2); continual rejoicing (9:3) which reminds us of Paul's words 'rejoice always ...' (Phil 4:4); the meaning of the broken yolk (9:4); the authority of Christ (9:6) and the meaning of each of the names He is given; and the nature of the Kingdom of God (9:7). No-one can write adequately about each of these highly important spiritual themes in just a few words, but they are powerful enough for us all to be able to remember them and learn from them.

The one thing I would suggest to all who seek to learn from this amazing scripture would be to make sure that you use a Bible dictionary or a concordance to follow through and understand the scriptural meaning of all the words used here. What we mean by a 'counsellor' today, for example, is not what Isaiah meant, because current counselling theory is quite different from the Biblical idea of giving godly advice. We also have very different views on authority today and even 'justice' and 'peace'. Ultimately, however, we treasure this scripture as the first major prophetic anticipation of Jesus as Messiah. Other prophets came later and said more about the One God would send to do His will, but this prophecy is the first and most explicit of its kind. It says more to us about Jesus than it is possible to express.

Questions for groups

1. What does this great passage of Scripture tell you about the work of the Messiah, and how does it help us understand the work of Jesus?

2. What are the special properties of the Messiah, as identified within verse 6, and what do they mean?
3. Discuss in your group whether you believe that there are any parts of this text remaining yet to be fulfilled.

Discipleship challenges

- *As a matter of discipline, take one of the important words or phrases of this text such as 'Prince of Peace' and explore what this means in scripture using any Biblical tools you may have at your disposal. Even the internet can be helpful!*
 - *Take the opportunity to share this text with someone else, and explain what it means to you today.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, You were there at the beginning, present in the creative work of the Father and graciously awaiting the time of Your revelation as the Saviour of the World. Keep us firm in our faith, strong in our hope, and constant in our love for others and for You, and in this way demonstrate our gratitude for everything You have done for us, Lord Jesus: AMEN
