

THE ONCE AND COMING KING

First in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on the prophecies of Christmas from Isaiah 9:1-7
“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest upon His shoulders.” Isaiah 9:6

Europe had been engulfed in war for nearly six years. Millions were dead or missing. Crumbled cities lay in ruins. Great armies battled from the shores of Normandy across fields and rivers, through the streets of towns and villages, and up and down mountains. Corporal James Pemberton had been in combat for 147 days. On May 8, 1945, Nazi Germany surrendered, and that night Pemberton stood watch in a cabin on the mountain overlooking Austria’s Inn River valley and tried to peer through the utter blackness. Suddenly the lights in Innsbruck came on. For years these lights had been extinguished. Now they twinkled like diamonds on a field of blue velvet. Pemberton wrote, *“If you have not lived in darkness for months, shielding even a match light deep in a foxhole, you can’t imagine the feeling.”* (S. E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, New York, 1997, 467)

Today I want to talk with you about light, and about victory over oppression, and about a king who is coming. These are promises of hope Isaiah gives in the first seven verses of Isaiah 9. This is the first of a four part series on the prophecies of Christmas I plan to bring during these December Sundays. The four passages we will consider are familiar and much beloved prophecies about the coming of Jesus. We hear them repeated year after year at Christmastime. Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem approximately 700 to 750 years before the coming of Christ. In this passage in Isaiah 9, the first thing he promises is light.

1. Light is coming. Isaiah opens chapter 9 with the imminent invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria. Assyria, where Syria is today, was the most powerful empire of its time in the ancient Middle East. It was dreadfully evil and bloodthirsty. Israel had drifted away from God. It had started when they revolted against the house of David, refusing to be governed by the royal line God had chosen. Soon they compromised their faith in God. Then wickedness and corruption permeated the land, and finally God had had enough. In Isaiah 9:1 Isaiah says, *“In earlier times [God] treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt.”* In other words, Isaiah was warning the people in the north that you cannot ignore God and reject his commandments without bringing upon yourself the most destructive consequences. Now the armies of Assyria would run over the land. The people who survived would be dragged into exile. The black darkness of a devastated land and bankrupt souls would smother them like a blanket.

But, Isaiah said, there’s hope! *“There will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish.... Later on He shall make [the land of northern Israel] glorious, by way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.”* About seven hundred years after Isaiah spoke, a young couple named Joseph and Mary were living in the territory Isaiah had referred to, in a town called Nazareth. Their land was dominated by Gentiles. The Romans had built a great city named Sepphoris about fifteen miles west of the Sea of

Galilee. It was called the *Gateway to the East*. It was a wealthy, influential center of pagan Roman culture. Joseph may have worked helping to build Sepphoris, for his occupation was not so much wood-worker as stone mason. Joseph and Mary were devout Jews, part of little clusters of colonists who had pushed into the land that once was northern Israel. They believed in this promise of Isaiah, that the Son of David, Israel's Messiah, would appear first in Galilee. They possessed no army. They could not conquer the Romans. But they could live there and establish towns and villages and by faith occupy the land until the Messiah came.

It was what Isaiah said in verse 2 that gave them hope. *The people who live in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.*" You and I are in some ways in a similar position to Mary and Joseph. We too live in a pagan land. In many areas America has rejected God, and the result is that a deep darkness has enveloped the lives of many of our neighbors. Last Tuesday night 400 people gathered at Dutch Fork High School at the invitation of the Community Roundtable of which I am the chairman, to consider what to do about teenage alcohol abuse that has taken the lives of several Dutch Fork students in the past few weeks. What darkness fills those homes this Christmas.

On Wednesday morning at the Community Roundtable meeting in the School District Board Room, Detective Richardson of the Lexington County Sheriff's Department spoke about the rising presence of gangs that are sucking in hundreds of teenagers across our state. The fastest growing demographic group becoming entangled with gangs is teenage white middle class boys. I heard parents tell of kids who despair because they believe there is no way out of the gangs in which they've become entangled short of death. Lexington County, and Dutch Fork High School in particular, is one of the strongest centers of gang activity. This is darkness! Our community's sons and daughters are susceptible to the violence and drug culture of the gangs because the light has gone out in their homes. We live amid this darkness. You know others where darkness has come. But there is hope. You remember when Jesus came that he said, *"I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."* (John 8:12) You and I can help turn on the lights in our homes and in our community by following the Lord Jesus Christ and telling our neighbors about him.

2. Victory over oppression is coming. Isaiah preached about the coming invasion of northern Israel but he also foresaw a day, a hundred years in the future, when the nation of Judah would, like Israel before them, would be overcome and exiled by the Babylonians. That You and I have never lived where we have had to flee an invading army. But through television we've seen the carnage in Darfur and destruction in Somalia and Lebanon and Gaza. Death, disease, famine and untold suffering follow in the wake of marching troops and rumbling tanks and hovering gunships. America is fighting a war in Iraq. By all accounts it seems not to be going well, and the American people are losing heart. I will have more to say in a later message on the significance of what is happening in Iraq and what is at stake. But for today it is enough to observe that this morning we have sons of this congregation in harm's way. We pray for them. We long for peace, but it seems illusive. The enemy is persistent. Politicians sow

disingenuous seeds of defeat and appeasement. But what we are experiencing is the normal state in which humanity has lived on this planet since there first were nations and they first raised armies.

Isaiah wrote about hope, however, to the people who were overwhelmed by war's sorrows. In verses 3-4 he says, "*You will break the yoke of their burden and the distaff 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.*" In other words, Isaiah was saying, there may be war now, but one day it will be over.

The battle of Midian refers to the time when the Midianites invaded Israel. Gideon sounded a call to arms and the men of Israel responded, but most of them were fearful. Gideon sent them home. In the end Gideon dismissed all but 300 men, and these he sent to surround the Midianite camp, armed only with torches hidden under pottery pitchers and trumpets, and their faith in God. At his signal they smashed the pitchers and the torches blasted the night with blinding light. His men blew their trumpets, and the Midianites came rushing out of their tents and attacked each other in panic. Three hundred Israelites defeated thousands in the Midianite army that night. The day of God's great victory will be like that. It will come by his power on behalf of his pitifully undermanned and underarmed people. The military equipment that supplies the armies of the world, Isaiah says, will be burned and destroyed, for the simple reason that none of it will be needed again. That will be a wonderful day. It hasn't happened yet, but it's going to come. At Christmastime each year we think about our hope for peace on earth. How will it happen? That's the third promise Isaiah gave.

3. A King is coming. Verse 6 says, "*A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders.*" Israel was to look for a great king who would come from God. According to verse 7 he would be a descendant of David, the heir to David's throne. Notice in verse 7 that Isaiah says, "*There will be no end to the increase of His government.*" That is, this king's domain will cover the earth. There will be no border protection problem because there will be no place where his kingdom does not extend. Nor will the government of this king ever grow stale or decline with the passing of the years. It will continually increase and grow stronger, surging with creative energy. Again, according to verse 7 this king's empire will be characterized by justice and righteousness. And again, verse 7 says, it will continue like this *forevermore*. What a glorious day it will be when at last he comes.

Who might this king be? You know, names are important. When a child is born the first question we ask the parents is, "What is his name?" So Isaiah tells us the name of this king. In the middle of verse 6 he says, "*His name will be....*" There was an article in *The State* newspaper on November 29 that discussed the passing fancy of the names people give their children. For example, it began by saying that if your name is Larry or Linda, you're probably in your fifties, more likely, closer to sixty. From 1946 to 1964 the most fashionable names for girls were Mary, Linda, and Lisa. For boys the most popular names were James, Robert, and Michael. Last year the most popular names

for babies were Emily and Jacob, followed by Christopher, Ethan, Joshua, Andrew, Olivia, Madison, Isabella, and Ashley. If you are Linda, Mary, Bob, Jim, Carol, Sue, Ron, Jerry or Wally, you're probably a grandparent. Names change, only "Rick" remains timeless! Today a lot of parents opt to give their children names that are unique, spelled Uneek, Uneque, or Uneqqee. And some give names that are just syllables based on sound alone.

When Isaiah speaks about the baby who would be born as king, the first thing we want to ask is, "What is his name?" Isaiah does not provide a personal name for the child he refers to in verse 6. Rather, he gives what we might call a throne name. For example, Her Majesty The Queen--Queen Elizabeth--bears several names that refer to her realm. She is called Head of the Commonwealth, Lord High Admiral, Supreme Governor of the Church of England or Defender of the Faith. She reigns as Queen over 16 sovereign states, with a total population of 128 million people. So the names mentioned in Isaiah 6 referring to the Christ are names dealing with his realm. Isaiah says, "*His name will be called. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*"

These four names are part of a sequence. *Wonderful Counselor* refers to Christ's role as a strategist. He is a masterful planner who has devised a plan to bring the world under his domain. He has mapped out his campaign. His birth at Christmas was merely the first step in that plan. His death and resurrection were the second step, in order that he might pay for his people's sins and save them by faith. The third step is revealed in the king's second name, *Mighty God*. *Mighty God* literally means *God is a Warrior*. Christ has sent his people into a battle against the forces of darkness and unbelief, against evil and injustice, to extend his kingdom to the farthest points on the planet. You know, "*Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.*" Our weapons are the gospel and prayer, the word of God, and deeds of love. Christ is working through us. Christ leads us. He joins us in the battle for the souls of men. But one day not so far off, he will come again to this world at the head of a heavenly army of angels, the greatest invasion force this world has ever seen. He will set his people free and usher in his kingdom of justice and righteousness. The third name, *Eternal Father*, confirms this. Christ is Father, not in the sense that God the Father is the first person of the Trinity. Rather, Christ is, we Americans might say, the Father of his country. That is, he is head of state who looks after the interests of his people and provides for their needs. Finally, the fourth name, *Prince of Peace*, reminds us that Christ will rule over all. There will be no opposition to him. His people will love him and they will live in harmony and peace. Friends, this is a king once come and coming again, who is truly worthy to govern the world. He is promised to us, and that is something that should give us glorious hope.

We, like Israel of old, have sinned against God and against each other. If our salvation depended on our own record of how good or bad we've been, we would each forfeit any blessings we might hope for. But the promises Isaiah gives are promises of grace. That is, they are offered out of the love and mercy of God to people who do not deserve them.

My dad flew a bomber during World War II. On Christmas Eve 1943, my dad received the order that he was to fly a mission on Christmas Day. There were a few Christians among the airmen at Chipping Ongar airfield northeast of London. As evening came they drifted by ones and twos into my dad's tent. They were far from home and the ones they loved. They thought of the towns across America where Christmas Day would dawn in peace. They recalled the church services where believers would sing carols and worship the Savior of the world, and offer prayers to God on behalf of those lonely men in England. They reminisced about their families who would circle around Christmas trees and open gifts wrapped in love. And all the while they were sick at heart that in a few hours time their heavy bombers would roll down the tarmac and lumber into the air and at the bombardier's signal they would release their bombs and kill people on the ground. And it would be Christmas. And so they began to pray. "Father," they said, "tomorrow is the birthday of the Prince of Peace. It doesn't seem right that we should bring death and destruction raining from the skies on this day. If it is possible, will you bring peace tomorrow so that we do not have to fly and kill?" And then they went to bed. My dad woke with a start and looked at his watch. It was 6:30 AM. At that moment he was supposed to be in the briefing room, going over the details of the mission. Dad lifted the phone and dialed the officer of the day. "Why didn't you call to wake us?" he demanded. "Look what time it is!" The voice on the other end replied, "Lieutenant, have you looked outside?" My dad stuck his head out through the tent door. All he saw was fog. Visibility was zero. No planes flew on Christmas Day 1943. Peace had come--for twenty-four hours. The one who rules the world had shut down war for a day.

Dear friends, the king has come and he is coming again. He can shut down the wars that bring tumult to your lives. Receive him in faith and hope. Teach your children to love him and follow him. Live in this world, but belong to another this Christmas.

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