

Message:

The prophet Isaiah describes the arrival of Christ some seven hundred years before it took place. And yet, Isaiah is describing the character and work of Christ within his own historical context. Therefore, it is helpful to look a bit more closely at the context of Isaiah 9. Isaiah lived during the era of the divided Kingdom-the time following Solomon when the Nation of Israel was split into two kingdoms: Israel, the ten tribes to the north, and Judah, the two tribes of the south. Chapters 7-9 of Isaiah describe some of Isaiah's interactions and prophecies during the reign of Ahaz, King of Judah.

Ahaz was the twelfth ruler of Judah. He lived about 200 years after Solomon and about 150 years prior to Jerusalem's destruction. Ahaz was defiant toward the Word of the Lord. 2 Kings 16: 2-4 gives this description: *"Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree."* Ahaz was a king of Judah, but his measure of disobedience was so severe and extreme, he resembled the kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

A great threat comes to Judah during Ahaz's rule as king. The mighty Assyrians from the north were on the march, conquering whatever they set their eyes upon. In response, the northern Kingdom of Israel had teamed up with the Syrians to defend themselves from the advancing Assyrian forces. Ahaz is approached by the alliance of Israel and Syria with the offer of joining them. When Ahaz refused their offer, they move on Judah to take out Ahaz. The threat against Ahaz shakes him deeply: *"When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."* (Isaiah 7:2). The Lord tells Isaiah to tell Ahaz that their threat is nothing to fear, *"It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass"* (Isaiah 7:7).

Ahaz turns, not to the Lord, but to Assyria. 2 Kings 16:7-8 describes Ahaz's actions: *"So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, "I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the*

king of Israel, who are attacking me.” Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasures of the king’s house and sent a present to the king of Assyria.” In light of Ahaz’s refusal to trust in the Lord and turn to Assyria instead, the Lord announces that He will deploy Assyria to not only take out the threat of Israel and Syria, but also to invade Judah itself. Isaiah prophecies: “Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel” (Isaiah 8:6-8).

As Isaiah 9 unfolds, we find Words of Hope. In spite of Ahaz’s disobedience, and in the context of Judah being overrun by the Assyrians, God will restore His people by restoring Himself to His people. Starting at verse 7, the Lord’s resolve to work on behalf of his people is clear: *“The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this”* (Isaiah 9:7). God wanted His people to know that He is passionate—fired up, lit up—about some thing: the deliverance of His people. Ahaz’s disobedience will not be the defining moment for the Kingdom of Judah; the Lord’s zeal for His people will be.

Isaiah explains that the gloom and anguish (v. 1), which would describe God’s people in their oppression, will turn into joy, and rejoicing, and gladness (v.3). Starting with the northern territories of Zebulun and Naphtali, *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone”* (Isaiah 9:2). God will come to His people first where the defeat and oppression was the greatest.

Isaiah further describes the deliverance of His people by unfolding something of the accomplishments of the deliverer: *“For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire”* (Isaiah 9:4-5). The Lord’s deliverer will completely break every symbol of oppression by defeating every threat of the oppressor.

But then the bombshell-the Lord's Mighty Deliverer will be a child: *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore"* (Isaiah 9:6-7). What? A Child?! Yes, a child will be the Lord's deliverer, a child will defeat the oppressor of the Lord's people, a child will deliver the Lord's people from all oppression, a child will establish a righteous reign on behalf of the Lord's people. A child, yes, but this is obviously no ordinary child. Isaiah's description takes us further than that of an ordinary child. Isaiah is unveiling something special: God's answer to everything that has ever oppressed us-ever terrorized us, ever enslaved us, ever created gloom and anguish, and ever left us in darkness-is a child.

Certainly the child would have connection to the Davidic line; He would be the rightful heir to rule and reign. But the way He would be described leaves us with no other conclusion then He will be divine. He will be the Most Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. He will reign eternally for there will be no end to His rule; in fact, His rule will only increase and expand.

Implications:

Jesus comes as God's deliver and therefore demonstrates God's passion to save. Jesus, which literally means "Yahweh Saves" is the name given to Mary's child in the opening pages of Matthew. Matthew, in fact, quotes from our Isaiah 9 passage as he describes the opening days of Jesus' public ministry. Matthew 4:12-17 states:

"Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Jesus, sent from God, is the God who saves. He reveals the passion of God to save as Isaiah foretold. The Scripture wants to make it clear to us that Jesus is the one Isaiah spoke of for

Jesus begins His ministry in the exact location Isaiah predicted some seven hundred years beforehand. What is God's reaction to a rebellious people? Rescue them!

The arrival of Christ, and therefore our celebration of His arrival ought to remind us that God is zealous to rescue a people for Himself. We as His people can best celebrate the arrival of Christ by cultivating, not only an enjoyment of the rescue we have come in share in Christ, but also a realization that God we should share God's passion to see others rescued. Paul in Romans 10:1 reflects the right passion to see others saved when, speaking of his own ethnic group, says, "*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.*"

Jesus comes for a people who need deliverance and delivers them. As Jesus began His public ministry in Galilee, He made it clear the kind of people that He was coming to rescue. Ironically, He reads a different but related passage of Isaiah to explain Himself. Luke 4:16-22 states:

"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This is where things begin to get dicey in the ministry of Jesus. In reading this passage from Isaiah, which shares similarities with our Isaiah 9 passage, it seems as though Jesus offends His audience. They begin taking offense with the notion that Jesus sees them as spiritually poor, spiritually oppressed, spiritually captive, spiritually blind. Jesus sees them as a people who need spiritual rescue and deliverance. Jesus would go on to be endeared by those who felt the weight of their oppression; but He would enrage those convinced of their own self-righteousness and self-sufficiency.

Just like in our own day, it offends the sensibilities of most to suggest that we are not automatically in a right relationship with God, that, in fact, sin has enslaved us, blinded us,

and impoverished us. The celebration of the arrival of Christ comes with a sharp jab: Jesus' coming was brought about, much like the context of Isaiah prophecy, because humanity, like Ahaz, has disregarded and rejected God and His Word, and as a result, trapped in darkness, filled with gloom and anguish.

Jesus deliverance is received through faith. Ahaz never experienced the deliverance promised for he responded in unbelief. Faith acknowledges and receives Jesus who He is. Faith acknowledges and admits I need what He did. Faith acknowledges I must have been in bondage and therefore turns from it in coming to Christ. Faith acknowledges I must no longer be in bondage now that I received Him and therefore seeks to live in light of that reality.

The celebration of the arrival of Christ and response that we should have to it, is best summarized in Revelation 7:10, "*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*"