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# Isaiah Series 1

## Lesson 3

### “Isaiah 9:1-7”

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**Objective** - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

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**Materials** - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

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**Procedures**

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

**8:23 or 9:1** For there will be no gloom for the one in anguish. In the former time he brought a curse to the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but afterward he will bring honor to the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.<sup>1</sup> <sup>9:1</sup> The people, the ones walking in the darkness will see a great light, the ones dwelling in the land of deathlike gloom, light will shine upon them. <sup>2</sup> You have enlarged the nation; you cause it great joy; they rejoice before you as those harvesting, joy as those rejoice when they divide plunder. <sup>3</sup> For the yoke of their burden and the rod across their shoulders, the rod of the ones oppressing them you shattered as on the day of Midian. <sup>4</sup> For every boot tramping in the shaking, and mantle from rolling in blood, and it becomes food for the burning fire. <sup>5</sup> For a male child has been brought forth to us, a son has been given to us, and dominion will come upon his shoulders and his name will be called wonderful, counseling one, mighty God, forever father, prince of peace. <sup>6</sup> The increase of his dominion and peace is without end, upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom he will cause it to be

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<sup>1</sup> In our English Bibles 8:23 is 9:1 and each verse after is moved along one verse.

**established and he will sustain it by means of judgment and by means of righteousness until forever. The zeal of Yahweh Sabaoth will accomplish this.**

As we come to this section of Scripture, it is difficult, if not impossible for us to come without bias. This particular prophesy is ingrained in our psyche, in our culture, and in our traditions. Taking a fresh look at what it meant to its original readers is incredibly difficult in meaning at the best of times, but when the passage is as obscure and difficult as this one is it is even harder. We find ourselves continually wanting to read the end of the book without reading what comes before, and we continually find ourselves pulling things that came after this prophesy was originally given, back into our view of this text. These are challenges that we face each time we come to these ancient texts, but with Isaiah 9 these challenges are even greater because this text is difficult at every turn. It is written in an obscure form of Hebrew poetry using words and phraseology that were likely difficult for the original audience and for us seem impenetrable. The rules of how this type of literature was supposed to work leave us perplexed and guessing. Despite, maybe even because of, all these

things people have done through the ages grappled and struggled with this passage and found meaning.

Maybe it is the case that the closer we get to the mind of God in Scripture the more challenging and difficult it will be for us to understand. If that is the case then this passage of Scripture must be closer to the mind of God than most as it is particularly challenging and it has been particularly challenging down through the centuries. As we come to this passage it will prove helpful and beneficial to allow the text to be examined with fresh eyes as if we were seeing and hearing it for the very first time, as if we lived in the 8th century B.C. in Israel in a time of great uncertainty and concern for the future. Times, they are a changing, and the changes do not appear to bode at all well for the people living in Israel, the people who are supposed to be God's covenant people. In the darkness of these changes and in the storm clouds that sit on the horizon these words are sent from God to his people, to challenge, to inspire, to convict, and to redeem. This passage has become for us today, and for many before us, a source of light and hope and in the midst of all of this, hopefully, a sense of awe. A sense of awe in regard to a God who knows the past, present and



future, and in all of his greatness, power and splendor took time, and takes time, for humanity. As we move on we will begin looking at this section of Scripture from the perspective of the scholars who have scoured it, dissected it and tried to piece the puzzle together, to understand the message as it was originally given and as it came to be understood anew among those that followed after them.

We begin with the fact that this section of Scripture has proven incredibly difficult to interpret. This, in part is revealed by the fact that it is difficult to even know where chapter 8 ends and chapter 9 begins. In the Hebrew text of Isaiah, 8:23 is seen as a continuation of the preceding oracle rather than as the beginning of the next oracle. In the ancient Greek text (The Septuagint), in a severely corrupted text, a major portion of verse 23 is seen as introducing chapter 9.<sup>2</sup> There is still a diversity of opinion as to the meaning, and where 8:23 belongs in the flow of this section. There are also debates regarding the date contents and significance of this entire section of Isaiah. Despite these disputes Albrecht Alt has made a very good case for verse 23 properly

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<sup>2</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in the Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 2001), p. 79.

being the introduction to a hymn that follows after it into chapter 9.<sup>3</sup>

Thus far none of the scholars who have disputed his view have argued with sufficient force to invalidate his perspective. In a formal sense the passage as a whole could best be described as a hymn in which Yahweh's deeds are commemorated and praised. Parallels in other hymns demonstrate that such a hymn is at times introduced by what might be called an exposition, or a heading (Psalm 21:3; 47:2; 85:1-2; 93:1; 94:1. Such a heading represents a comprehensive statement of the events that are being celebrated in the hymn that follows this heading.<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah 8:23 (9:1 in English Bibles) is the key to understanding the entire passage (chapter 9). Despite having this key the passage is still incredibly difficult to interpret. Without going into all the detail, this passage of ancient Hebrew Scripture, the geographical objects, and the strophes of the hymn must in one way or another refer to the parts of Israel that were annexed by the Assyrians as a result of the events of

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<sup>3</sup> Albrecht Alt, "Jesaja 8,23-9,6 Befreiungsnacht und Kronungstag," *Festschrift Alfred Bertholet zum 80 Geburtstag gewidmet*, in Walter Baumgärtner, ed. (Tübingen, J.C.B Mohr, 1950), pp. 29-49.

<sup>4</sup> Jesper Høgenhaven, "On the Structure and Meaning of Isaiah VIII 23B," *Vetus Testamentum* 37, 2 (1987), pp. 218-221.

734-732 B.C. The subject of the strophes of the Hymn is Yahweh.

Isaiah 8:23 (9:1 in the English Bible) describes a decisive change in the fate of the Israelite territories annexed during this event. The passage looks back upon this Assyrian occupation of Israelite territories in the first sentence and then in the second envisages their future liberation. The hymn however, celebrates both of these events as if they had already taken place and as such creates a kind of literary fiction within which the future is anticipated with hope and promise. The hymn most likely dates from the period between 732 and 722 B.C. and predicts that those parts of Israel which have been conquered by the Assyrians will be liberated and a new Davidic king will be enthroned in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

This familiar and much loved oracle offered to Judah, that was driven forward by its distress and despair in a world that appeared to be filled with hopelessness, hope that they would get another chance. The first verse of this section is organized around the contrast between the “former time” and the “latter time.” In the context of Isaiah chapters 6-8 the “former time” is the time of failure and oppression

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<sup>5</sup> Jesper Høgenhaven, “On the Structure and Meaning of Isaiah VIII 23B,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37, 2 (1987), pp. 218-221.

under the kingship of Ahaz. The “latter time” is then the time after Ahaz when new royal leadership (Hezekiah) makes new possibilities available. This oracle then articulates a radical opportunity for Judah, when all that is in darkness will be overcome by the “great light” namely, a new David. When this contrast of “former/latter” is read in the larger context of the entire book of Isaiah (as in 43:18-19), then the former time is the entire pre-exilic and exilic experience of abuse and suffering. The “latter time” is then the time of homecoming and restoration.<sup>6</sup> To be sure this was most often interpreted in terms of return to the land from captivity in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, some have thought there was more to this passage than what happened in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, or under Hezekiah.

As this passage was taken up by the early church the contrast can be understood in terms of B.C. and A.D. so that it is the coming of the Messiah that marks the dividing point between the “former” and the “latter” times. It is evident that this elegant poetry allows a multilayered interpretation. In the first instance, however, the oracle was intended to announce the birth of a new Davidic king who would

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 81-82.



have the resolve, capacity, and authority, to reverse the fortunes of Judah. In this part of Isaiah, Ahaz represents the embodiment of failed leadership, his son, Hezekiah is then reckoned to be the celebrated object of this exuberant prophesy. Indeed Hezekiah did become, as can be seen in passages like Isaiah 36-39, a vigorous agent for the recovery of Judah in the face of the Assyrian threat.<sup>7</sup> As great as the victories and successes were under Hezekiah the majesty, power and grandeur of this prophesy cries out for more; more certainly than even great things that were accomplished by Hezekiah. There are glimmers of the power and majesty of this passage in the reign of Hezekiah, but the grandeur of the vision articulated by this passage far surpasses the highlights of Hezekiah's reign and cries out for more and draws us to a greater hope.

What we have here is really a glorious, celebrative affirmation of Yahweh, who through a Davidic king, will create a wondrous new possibility for Judah that is both unqualified and unconditional. Yahweh does this from a point of newness, without extrapolating to anything that has gone before. This passage draws into view the

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 82.

potentiality, and even the promise of something entirely new, and unexpected. The poem is set out in three moments. Verses 2-3 (English Bible) announce the astounding newness that will be visible in the sociopolitical horizon of Judah. The “darkness” refers to a situation of despair and oppression that will come, initially, at the hand of Assyria (cf. 8:11; 9:1). Then there will come a “great light;” such language commonly refers to the glory of Yahweh, to his visible splendor, majesty and sovereignty. This light represents Yahweh coming vigorously into the life of Judah where this presence had been absent.<sup>8</sup>

The imagery of the light bursting into the “deep darkness” here is imagery evocative of something to be celebrated and greeted with cascading joy. The poet, in an effort to demonstrate the depth and power of the joy evoked here offers two parallel situations of joy, the most exuberant and extreme cases that he could imagine. One of those is the joy of the harvest, which is surely repeated down through the ages from year to year by farmers everywhere. That moment when the crops are secure from the threats of weather, and all the

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 82.

other potential hazards is surely an occasion that evokes images of extreme jubilation (Psalm 126:6). The second image is that of the dividing of the booty from the conquest of a defeated enemy. Perhaps this one does not seem politically correct to us today, but this is not a poem written with political correctness in mind. The poet uses these two images as a way of drawing us into the level of exuberance that will come with the light.<sup>9</sup>

The second moment marked by this poem is the transformation that is a vigorous military transformation (4-5) that speaks to the oppression that has come to the original audience, likely in the form of heavy imperial taxes. The turnaround that is predicted here will be unexpected and sudden like the unexpected victory of Gideon over the oppressive Midianites (cf. Judges 6:2-6). The defeat of Assyria will be as inexplicable and surprising as was the defeat of Midian, but in some miraculous manner it is assured. The victory will come, but it will not be a defeat that is spiritual, religious, or nice. It is the victory of a brutal, military action filled with the brutality of blood and much killing. The equipment of the enemy is burned and the enemy is

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 82-83.

humiliated (cf. Psalm 46:8-9). Yahweh will exterminate the enemy with extreme prejudice and the hateful and violent empire will succumb in a violent and forcible manner.<sup>10</sup> The imagery here perhaps brings with it a sense that justice is being done as Assyria was known for its extreme brutality and lack of any semblance of mercy. They prided themselves on their brutality and used terror as a weapon to insure obedience from their conquests. Images of this type of victory and change can be seen in the hopes and expectations of the church in texts like Revelation 19.

In the third, and final moment in the poem we come to the mention of the royal agent (6-7). Up to this point no agent has been named; the events have been described in terms of being through the agency of Yahweh. Now bursting on the scene comes this child, a son, an heir to the throne. Certainly the birth of an heir to the throne who was more effective than his predecessor would be welcome news indeed, but in the words that are given here there appears to be something more, something greater than the promise of a just and righteous king. It is perhaps in this imagery that we begin to grasp a

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 83.

message of hope that is beyond even our wildest imaginings. this child would be given (נָתַן) to the people in some inexplicable way. This is a passage that perhaps would have been viewed in its time as simply speaking of the coming of a new king in the first part of verse 6, but even here there are hints of something great and more spectacular. The titles that are given to him seem to go beyond what one would expect in Jewish literature. This passage has been seen by some as one of the most beautiful and expressive in all of Scripture and as reflecting a high view of the monarchy.<sup>11</sup>

The four phrases of 9:6b are commonly translated as “wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace.” There have been recent attempts to examine these passages and apply them in a figurative sense as royal language. The fact is that the description of the king as “mighty God” is hard to parallel precisely in Middle Eastern literature, and even harder to find in the literature of Israel. One has to question here what the original hearers of these words will have understood by them? There is no parallel to the suggested designation

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<sup>11</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Revised Edition, in the Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 24 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 173.

of a present, or future king as God (אלה) in the singular and there is much disputation regarding Psalm 45:6 (7 in Hebrew Bible). There is some discussion that perhaps these phrases should be translated differently than is common in our Bibles, but whatever explanation you give to these words either taken from a Jewish perspective, or a Middle Eastern perspective they are startling words that jangle the senses.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is why they were so easily attributed to the Messiah by Christians.

Perhaps more than any part of this section this part is the hardest for us to leave behind our notions that clearly this applies to Jesus and to no other. Some have seen what is said here as highly ritualized hyperbole, but they do so without demonstrating any precedent for such a view. Brueggemann describes them as a “well-known series of royal names” and as “likely highly ritualized hyperbole.”<sup>13</sup> The problem with this view is that there is no data to support it. If this language is indeed being used to describe the king then it appears to be without precedent not only in Israel, but also in


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<sup>12</sup> John Goldingay, “The Compound Name in Isaiah 9:5(6)” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999), pp. 239-244.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 83.

the Middle East as a whole. Some have resorted to Egypt for an explanation, but even in that instance the evidence seems thin and highly unlikely to be of any relevance here. For the original audience this is a very difficult passage and even Jewish interpreters through the ages have continued to struggle with what it meant. If anything the language of verse 7 makes the interpretation of this passage as a mortal earthly king even more difficult rather than less, as it talks in terms of “endless peace” and as being “from this time onward and forevermore.”

If this passage has fulfillment in the kingship of Hezekiah then certainly hyperbole is there in high order. As is the case with many other passages in Isaiah this one seems to speak of something far beyond what is ordinary and certainly beyond even the miraculous victory that saved Jerusalem under the reign of Hezekiah when the forces of Sennacherib were destroyed as they laid siege to Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:36-38). We perhaps get glints and glimmers of what is possible when this son of God would come on the scene, but the power, majesty and beauty of the imagery here not only fires the imagination of generations of Jews, but still does the same for




Christians, even to this day. Matthew would pick up this passage (Matthew 4:13-17) and apply this to Jesus in a way that still allows this passage to fire the imagination with expectation and hope today. In the darkness and despair of a people long ago, and for us far away, Yahweh ignited a fire in the imagination and in the heart of people who would reach out for justice, peace, and eternity. Even today our hearts cry out within us for the vision that is set out so beautifully in this ancient Hebrew poetry.

# Synopsis

As we come to this very complex and difficult section of Hebrew Scripture it is critical that we begin the interpretive process by trying to leave behind our preconceived notions of this text. We need to try to begin by understanding the setting of this passage as well as we can and then follow the path of how this passage was understood through the various periods. This text presents unique challenges on a number of different levels, from understanding where to divide the chapters, to the actual language, to what period it refers to in the historical setting of Israel.


The passage begins in our English Bibles prophesying an end to the gloom and the anguish that have been the curse of the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the nations. Into the darkness and gloom, most likely initially this refers to the period of Assyrian conquest of this area, will come to see a great light. Traditionally that great light has been seen in this period as a reference to Hezekiah, whose kingship brought a dramatic shift from the failed rule of Ahaz. Some have then seen a later fulfillment of this passage in the time of



the Babylonian captivity and the kingship of Cyrus the Great and the return of the exiles from that Babylonian captivity. The problem with either of these interpretations is that they just do not seem as grand, or dramatic as the vision seems to set out.

The coming of the male child seems to some, to fit the coming of Hezekiah, but then the titles seem to speak in terms that are far grander than any title that could be expected in either a Near Eastern context, or in terms of a Jewish context. The description given in this verse is perhaps what has caused generation after generation to be fascinated with this passage and to seek comfort and hope in it. At verse 7 (English Bible) the passage continues to speak of something that seems far more dramatic and larger than anything known in the early history of Judaism. This passage speaks in terms of a kingdom that is everlasting and totally just and righteous. Nothing that has up to this point in the history of Israel would seem to fit this description outside of the coming of Jesus. The final phrase indicates that his will happen by the zeal of Yahweh of hosts (Sabaoth).

For the church this passage came to be a foretelling of the coming of the Messiah and everything would be changed by this



coming. This seems, by far to be the most suitable interpretation of this passage among those that we have explored. It is only in this interpretation that the major elements all seem to fit in a way grand and large enough to fit this vision. This powerful passage of Scripture has the ability to bring hope in a variety of periods to a variety of audiences.

# Questions

1. Why do you think the original hearers of this prophesy will have kept these words and passed them on from generation to generation?
2. What are some things that you hope for today?
3. What are some things in history that remind you of the phrase “deathlike gloom?”
4. What are some things that you do to express joy? Why?
5. What are some things that bring you real joy? Why?
6. As you approach this passage as if you lived in the 8th century B.C. what are some things that you might have expected as a result of hearing these words?
7. How do these words speak to you today?
8. What does the concept of righteousness mean to you? What might it look like if it were a reality?
9. What are some things that you see in our world today that you equate with darkness?
10. What are some things that you see in our world today that you equate with light?
11. What do you think the role of the church is today in the conflict between the light and the darkness?
12. How do you seek to be a bringer of light in your daily life?
13. Who are some people that bring light into your life?
14. Why do you think God might have told the people of Israel about something that was not going to happen for more than 700 years?