

Shine the Light to Scatter the Darkness

Isaiah 8:19-9:4 (NIV)

¹⁹ When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? ²⁰ Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. ²¹ Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. ²² Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. ¹ Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan— ² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ³ You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. ⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Who here is uncomfortable driving at night? Presently I can still pass my driver's test without glasses, but I remember the day I realized that I should probably get some. It was night, rainy. The streetlights and headlights were starred and overly bright to my eyes. I realized that I wasn't able to see the lines on the road very well - dark as they were faded from use and sun, hidden by puddles of water - and I would drift from side to side on the highway. I knew that I should have my sister drive, but I was too much of a teenager / young adult to admit that. I trusted my own abilities to get me safely through the darkness.

Driving through the night is one kind of darkness – a physically dark time, but there are also spiritually dark times. Isaiah prophesied during such dark times. In the northern tribes who had kept the name Israel, king after king after king was morally and spiritually corrupt, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord. Assassinations and coups were regular occurrences. During Isaiah's ministry, Israel would fall to the Assyrians, be deported, and never return to their homeland.

In the south, in Judea, things were also bad. In Isaiah chapter 7, we know that there is a man named Ahaz on the throne in Jerusalem. His description: "Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God. He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites." (2 Kings 16:2b-3) King Ahaz's immoral life set the tone for the people's spirituality. They followed his example. This was a very dark time for Israel as they consulted mediums and spiritists and the dead instead of God and his Word.

What are our spiritually dark times? Maybe when you went through the death of a loved one or a bout with depression that maybe you are still not clear of. Maybe it's looking around in our world today and thinking that we have become such a godless nation as we hear about the #metoo movement and Harvey Weinstein's trial, hate crimes, terrorist attacks, abortions, you name it. Evil seems to be winning. Hope is dwindling. What does our future hold? Will we get to our heavenly home or will we be consumed by the darkness around us, our own depression on the state of things?

That uncertainty about the future while everything looks bad, that can drive you mad like the blinding light from on-coming traffic. When we are in the dark and don't know the future, we become anxious like not seeing the lines on the road at night. We start entertaining the worst-case scenarios. What if God isn't real? What if I did something so bad that God has abandoned me? How will I ever get to heaven if I don't know the way, if I don't know the future? God why aren't you helping me??? How will I get through this on my own? This is what was happening to the Israelites in Isaiah's day. "Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness." (verses 21-22)

However, God does not leave people in ditch of spiritual darkness. He comes to rescue them, like how dawn rescues us from the darkness of each and every night with the dawn of a new day. "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan— The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." (verses 1-2)

God had promised that his light would lift the darkness. Just two verses later in Isaiah chapter 9 we see that Light: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." (Isaiah 9:6-7) The light that dawned in the land of deep darkness where no one sought God was directly fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. He is the Light that dawned on this land of darkness, a messed-up world filled with godlessness and hate. He came preaching and teaching, healing and forgiving as God's one and only Son, the Savior of the world. By doing so, he scattered the darkness for these people.

With Christ, God illuminated the future for all people walking in darkness. He showed them a future not of defeat and misery and slavery, but a future belonging to him, a future where there would be no more disease or sickness, a future in his kingdom - with him in heaven. Christ showed them a future where they were all victorious over sin. The people would taste victory over spiritual darkness from God. "You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor." (verses 2-3)

We, like the Israelites, were once lost in hate, enslaved to our sin, trapped by the evils of this world, but Christ, the Light, dawned on us. With his perfect life and his innocent sacrifice, our darkness of sin was scattered. He rescued us, like one of those victories for God's people in the days of old, in the days of Gideon the judge. Following God's Word and his instruction, Gideon and 300 men armed with nothing but torches in jars of clay defeated the Midianite army of about 135,000. Their battle was not won by their strength, their strategy, but by the hand of God – the same way Christ has given us victory over our sin, over our darkness, and gives us a clear, illuminated future where we will escape the dark evils of this world. Christ the Light that scatters the darkness.

Because Jesus, the Light has come, we know exactly where we are going. It's like driving on a sunny day with clear skies. You can see that path. You know the outcome. We know our future - one of joy, of victory with God. So, no matter how dark it gets in life, with Christ there is light, light which scatters the darkness. He makes it clear that, yes, we are going to heaven. He will get me through this and take me to my heavenly home. When my time on earth ends, I already know how God will judge me. He will say that all the darkness of my sins, my evil, my darkness, it's gone because of him. He overcame it all and scattered it away from me.

Sadly, after having been shown the light, the Israelites slipped back into darkness. King Ahaz was given this prophecy from Isaiah, but he decided not to consult God and listen to his Word. Instead, Ahaz sought other advice. He went to the nation of Assyria for military protection, even going so far as to give the silver and gold of the temple of the Lord to them to secure the alliance. Ahaz went to other gods and built altars to them instead of consulting the Lord's instruction. He placed an altar to a false god in the Lord's temple, putting out God's light in his life and instead plunging himself in darkness. It would take another 150 years, but Judah would fall just like northern Israel. Jerusalem and the Lord's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The people were taken captive in darkness as they wandered away from the promised guiding light that God would send. They had no light of dawn because they turned away from God's Word and tried to get through it on their own.

The darkness is always trying to envelope our lives and overtake us. It was trying even with Jesus. In the Gospel reading, we heard that John the Baptist was arrested. Jesus' forerunner, this prophet of God, was incarcerated for bringing God's Light to people. John would never be released but instead would die in prison. Darkness was trying to envelop Jesus' ministry and snuff out his Light.

Jesus' response? He went out preaching and teaching. He recruited four disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. He started actively training people to spread his Light after his ministry came to an end. The only way to combat the darkness is to shine the light. The only way to combat the evil of this world, our darkness against others, is to spread the Light of Jesus, his Word, his instruction. Only Jesus illuminates victory over sin and evil by his accomplishment for us. Only Jesus' life and sacrifice light up our road to heaven, showing exactly where our future goes. His Light scatters the darkness of an uncertain future.

And when darkness tries to take us captive again, we shine the light of Jesus. We tell others what he has done. We proclaim the one and only God who came and lived perfectly for us and delivered us from our sin. He is our future. He gives everyone a clear future, even if you feel darkness encroaching on you from every side. No matter what else is happening with the evils of this world, you have the certain Light of Jesus. He is the Light that scatters our spiritual darkness and the spiritual darkness of all people to give us a clearly illumined future with him.

The light has dawned. Jesus has come. We rejoice before the Lord "as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder" (verse 3) because the Light scatters our darkness. He continues to scatter the darkness of others as we shine his light to the people we know. Amen.