

“High Hopes: Those in Darkness Have Seen a Light” | Isaiah 9:1-7

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This Advent we are reflecting on the biblical theme of hope. Hope is confident expectation for good in our future.

On Sundays we are looking at passages from the prophet Isaiah to see how he encouraged hope during particularly dark times—when Israel was in and out of exile, both under the judgment and grace of God.

Today we come to Isaiah 9:1-7. The historical setting is around 732 BC, when the Assyrian empire first conquered parts of northern Israel—taking many into captivity and turning that region into a province of Assyria.

Isaiah opens in verse 1 speaking of **the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.... the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee**” (9:1). This is the northern-most part of Israel and was the first to be captured by Assyria. Here is how the book of Kings records what had happened:

In the days of King Pekah (reigned ca 752–732 BC) of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor—Gilead, Galilee, the entire region of Naphtali; and he deported the inhabitants to Assyria (2 Kings 15-29).

Since Isaiah’s commissioning as a prophet in chapter 6, he has been announcing that this would happen. But now, as it unfolds, he offers a stunning prophetic-poem of hope, which opens with this summary statement about reversals:

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. (Isa 9:1).

The poem goes on to speak of light breaking into darkness (9:2), deliverance from oppressors and war (9:4-5), and of a divine Son, a Prince of Peace, who establishes an eternal kingdom (9:6-7).

What strikes me about this prophetic poem is the timing and tension of it. Isaiah speaks of light precisely when it is darkest. And in terms of tension—he speaks of events that will not happen until centuries, even millennia, after these people’s lives. And yet, the point of this prophetic passage at this moment is to give these people *hope*.

I want to follow the passages own structure and draw out three features of how biblical hopes works.

Hope, in Isaiah 9:1-7, involves **(1) Perspective, (2) Foretaste, (3) Lordship.**

- Perspective—hope sees by eyes of faith.
- Foretaste—hope feels even now heaven's warmth.
- Lordship—hope rests secure in the One who takes charge of our lives.

We turn first to perspective.

I. Perspective: Hope Sees with Eyes of Faith

One of the earliest titles for Prophet in Israel was "seer." "Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, 'Come, let us go to the **seer**,' for today's 'prophet' was formerly called a **seer**" (1 Sam 9:9). The title—which came from a Hebrew word meaning "to see" (*rō'eh*, רֹאֶה), emphasizes this dual role of a prophet: they both spoke the Words they heard from God, and conveyed the vision they saw, which God revealed to them.

The Book of Isaiah opens stressing this *seeing* feature, "**The vision of Isaiah the son of Amaz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem**" (Isaiah 1:1).

This ability to see things that others cannot is the only explanation for Isaiah's words in 9:1-7. For with natural eyes, he is looking at deportation and disaster; but with the eyes of faith, he sees a completely different vista: Gloom turns to glory; light penetrates darkness; a king arises establishing eternal reign.

And notice Isaiah is not using future tense—he is speaking as though this has happened:

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.... on them has light shone... 4 For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken.... For to us a child is born (Isa 9:2-6).

We learn Matthew 4 that part of what Isaiah is seeing will not happen for some seven-hundred years, for He is seeing Jesus:

leaving Nazareth [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of **Zebulun and Naphtali**, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet **Isaiah** might be fulfilled: ¹⁵ "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶ 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. (Matt 4:13-16).¹

Here, then, is the first thing to consider about our passage: to people in the darkness of despair, God offers a vision seen by the eyes of faith. What does this tell us about the nature of biblical hope?

¹ John adds, "Isaiah said these things because he saw [Christ's] glory and spoke of him" (John 12:41).

Hope and Seeing

Hope has a strange relationship with sight. On the one hand, we hope for what we *cannot* see. As Paul explains, “We hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom 8:25). Hope entails waiting upon something that has not yet occurred—something that with our naked eye, we cannot see.

Yet at the same time, the Bible also fosters hope by asking us to see, but to see with *the eye of faith*. Through God’s revelation, we are to see, in our circumstances and our world, things that others cannot.

I think a helpful way to understand how this works is through the term “perspective.” Two people can look at the same thing with the natural eye but have different *perspectives* about it. One sees a glass half-empty; the other sees a glass half-full. Perspective has to do with how we interpret and evaluate the *meaning* of what we see, and how we assess its role in a broader story.

What Isaiah is modeling for anyone walking in darkness is that God wants us, by the eyes of faith, to see our circumstances from His perspective. This happens with Isaiah in two ways: Isaiah sees *broader* and *deeper* than the natural eye:

Hope Sees Broader and Deeper

First, Isaiah sees **broader** than the immediate historical events: momentary judgement is placed in larger picture of God’s work to sanctify and save his people. He will come and deliver.

Second, Isaiah sees **deeper** into events. Most of Israel saw the rise of Assyria as historical happenstance and found themselves at this new nation’s mercy. We know this is what Assyria thought, for this is one of those ancient biblical accounts also recorded outside the Bible. In the Annals of the Kings of Assyria, it is stated,

Israel (lit- Omri-land Bit-Humria)... All its inhabitants (and) their possessions I led to Assyria. They overthrew their king Pekah (Pa-qa-ha) and I placed Hoshea (A-u-si) as king over them.²

But Isaiah sees deeper: Assyria is a tool in God’s hands—God is behind these events. As we hear in Isaiah 10,

Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? (Isa 10:15).³

² For more on this inscription see https://cojs.org/tiglath-pileser iii and the syro-ephraimite war-kalah palace summary inscription 4- 730 bce/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ See also, Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! ⁶ Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him... 12 When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount

Israel has not fallen into the hands of a godless nation. Rather, they have fallen into the hands of God. This gives hope—because even as God brings judgement on his people, he remembers his promises to ultimately keep and bless them.

Two thoughts on application:

What “visionary” frames the big picture for you? In Isaiah’s day, there were false prophets framing the events all wrong. Just prior to Isaiah 9, in chapter 8 we read:

And when they [these people] say to you, “Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter,” should not a people inquire of their God?... If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn (Isa 8:19-20).

In our day, we laud leaders who seem to be “visionaries,” or influencers who appear to see deeply into the human condition. These people “frame reality” for us and we put our hope in what they see. But Isaiah 9 is clear: the Word of God must frame how we see; it is with God’s revelation about reality that shapes our hope.

How do you encourage Christians friends? The key to Christian encouragement often involves re-framing our brother’s or sister’s *perspective*, so they again see their circumstances from the viewpoint of God’s work *in them*, and God’s plan over them. Hope requires someone who sees the **aerial map** (God’s big picture) and someone who sees **into our hearts** (God’s inner work). To endure grief, suffering, or long waiting, we need God’s perspective, not natural sight.

[T] That is the relationship between hope and *seeing*, or *perspective*. Next, we turn to hope and foretaste.

II. Foretaste: Hope Tastes Fulfillment Before It’s Completely Here

Next, notice the image Isaiah uses in verse 2 of light breaking into darkness:

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 (9:2).

Across Scripture, darkness can refer to the **chaos** at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:1-2), **exile** and **slavery** (Ps 107:10, 14), **horrible grief** (Job 16:16), the **night when crime and sin occur** (Job 34:22) and the **realm of death** (Ps 23:4; Job 38:17). It seems many of these themes are afoot in Isaiah 9.

But to people “walking” and “dwelling” in this “deep darkness,” a great light has been seen.

In Scripture, light often refers to God. “**God dwells in unapproachable light**” (I Timothy 6:16); He manifest himself as a **pillar of fire** to Israel (Exod) or **glory** in the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:1). Jesus says, “**I am the light of the world**” (John 8:12; 2 Corinthians 4:4-6).

Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes (Isa 10:5-6, 12).

To stress here, is that this light—even though it involves the final consummation of God’s Kingdom (9:6-7)—it can be experienced *now*. Just as we feel the warmth of the Sun despite its distance from us; or see the light of dawn even before the Sun breaks the horizon; God’s people experience foretaste of the coming kingdom even before it’s complete arrival. And foretastes of our future, foster hope in the present.

Examples of Foretastes

Even in exile, Israel tasted the goodness and presence of God. There was the remnant of the faithful God preserved; there were the prophets; there was the Word of God. In exile, God often multiplied the nation of Israel—blessing them in the midst of hardship. And the Old Testament is filled with examples of people who hoped in the Lord for deliverance, answers to prayer, and help—and God showed up powerfully. Psalm 33:22 puts it so well,

“Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you” (Ps 33:22).

Christians enjoy even more foretastes: we have the truth about **Christ**—toward whom Isaiah could only look. We have the **solidity of his resurrection**, and the **Church** he founded that we are part of. We have the **Holy Spirit dwelling** in us—Paul speaks of how we “**have the firstfruits of the Spirit**” (Rom 8:23); James likens Christians to “**a kind of firstfruits**” of God’s new creation (James 1:18).

Here is the point: while hope looks, ultimately, to heaven when we will see God, face to face, and have no more pain or sorrow, hope experiences—here and now—tastes of this world to come.

A Christian learns to hope both in the life to come, and in the presence and aid of God in the life we now live. Paul is a great example of this. In Second Corinthians he explains an excruciating experience he had. But in it, he shows us how one hopes both in the life to come, and in God’s intervention here and now:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on **God who raises the dead** [Hope in *life to come*]. ¹⁰ **He delivered us from such a deadly peril** [Hope in a deliverance that happened *in life now*], and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. (2Cor. 1:8)

Christians cultivate hope that feels to promise of the life to come. But they also enjoy the hope of the foretastes of God’s ultimate reign here and now—God’s presence, answers to prayers, help, deliverance, healing. These, too, bolster our hope.

[T] Lastly, let us consider the crescendo of Isaiah’s vision—where we see what God does, more specifically, for his people, in verses 4-7. And with this, our third insight about Hope: Hope involves Lordship—*resting secure in the leadership of the Prince of Peace*.

III. Lordship—hope rests secure in the One who takes charge of our lives.

The rest of the poem lays out what God does for his people in the future—some of that future we know has now come about, but not all of it.

There will be deliverance (v 4): 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.

War and all conflict will cease (v 5): For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

And a perfect leader will arise (6-7): 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. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.

The child of verse 6 is Jesus. Here the echoes of Isaiah's words in the announcement of Jesus' birth:

When **Gabriel** appears to Mary, he says, "behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Lk 1:31-33).

When **the angels** appear to the Shepherds they say: "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11).

His Lordship Secures

How does this child, Christ, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, affect our hope here and now?

There are so many things we could say, but I leave us with one: twice in the description of Christ there is the language of "**government**," meaning the **administration** of his rule. This means that when Jesus becomes the Lord of your life, you come under the *governing care* of his wise counsel, mighty power, fatherly heart, and gift of peace.

A Child's Hope is in Leadership of Parent. We know that for a young child, hope for their well-being is tied up with the leadership of wise parenting. There is a world of decisions made around them they are unaware of—but all for their good. The parent is a present protector, wise counselor. They give care and seek peace for the child.

The Christian hopes in Christ's Lordship over their lives—which is the active, present care of the Prince of Peace, Isaiah foretold.

To know that your life, no matter how it at present feels or looks, is under the Lordship of Him, of Christ, is to have hope indestructible. For, as Paul put it, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Phil 1:6).

Put your hope the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace by giving him Lordship of your life.

Let’s pray.

Small Group Questions for Isaiah 9:1-7

1. To people walking in darkness (9:2), Isaiah offers a vision of God’s redemption, but well before it happens—he invites a different *perspective*, seeing things from God’s bigger picture rather than with the natural eye. How does this challenge or encourage your own perspective of events in your life currently? What are some ways you tend to see only with “the natural eye” or at “the ground level” rather than God’s bigger story?
2. Isaiah sees “broader” and “deeper” than others—what God is doing across history and what God is doing in these events of exile. Have you been helped by a friend who saw way God was doing more broadly or deeply in events in your life?
3. The “light” Isaiah speaks of “has shone” (9:2) on Israel. This light speaks of God’s presence and power, and points to Jesus (John 8:12). This means that even before the consummation of God’s plans, we can experience “foretastes” or “inbreaking” of his kingdom. How have you experienced foretaste of God’s future kingdom? How have these bolstered your hope?
4. The passage from Isaiah concludes with a picture of Jesus and His reign (Isa 9:6-7). Isaiah emphasizes this future king’s “governance” (vv. 6, 7), or Lordship. How has giving your life to Christ’s Lordship (rule, care, governance) brought you hope? Are there areas of your life currently where you feel hopeless that you might surrender to his Lordship, and thereby experience the Hope of his power and control?
5. Where do you most need hope right now? Say a prayer that you would experience the light of Christ in this very area this week. Turn it over to His Lordship.