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The Light of Christmas

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Christmas and the Promise in the Old Testament

We naturally connect Christmas to the Gospel and the New Testament, but it is rooted in the promises of the Old Testament. One of those prophecies was given in Isaiah 9:2, *The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.*

Christmas is a reminder, not only of the momentous event of the birth of Christ, but of the consequence of that event: the Light shines in our dark world. Jesus has come to bring His light into our lives. We live in “dark” age, and it is helpful for us to look more deeply at this message delivered many years ago.

Isaiah and the Christmas: The Darkness and the Light

The prophet Isaiah spoke these words not long after he predicted the destruction of Northern Israel at the hands of the ruthless Assyrian empire. This very region is the “dark land” that will be visited by the light. He is specifically directing his prophecy to “the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.” This is the Northern most region of Israel, and it will truly become a place of darkness. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians overran the area, and took thousands of Hebrews captive.

Many of these Israelis were scattered across the ancient world, as the Assyrians removed them and replaced them with captives from other parts of their empire. For the next several hundred years, Northern Israel will be a place of mixed race as the Israelis married the foreigners in their midst. More poignantly, they will live without the light of God’s presence and blessing.

These residents of the North will continue to worship at the false and idolatrous replacement for the temple established by the first king of Israel, Jeroboam. He and his successors established a golden calf at Mount Gerazim and at Dan and made Samaria their capitol. This practice continued after the Assyrian invasion. And when the Jews built the second temple in the time of Nehemiah, the Samaritans built their own temple on Gerazim, establishing traditions of Samaritan theology and worship that survive to this day. The result is that the darkness of false worship lasted in Northern Israel for over 700 years.

Darkness: What It Means?

“Darkness” in the Bible refers to both the absence of God and the presence of sin. As men turn away from the knowledge of God, they fill the vacuum with the false and fleeting pleasures of sin. In some ways it is a chicken or egg problem; do men turn away from God to engage in sin or does engaging in sin cause men to turn away from God? In my view both of these principles are in play, and contribute to a deepening of the darkness both individually and corporately.

This principle was certainly at work in the history of the Northern kingdom and continued on after the Assyrian invasion. *“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water; but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from North to East, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.”* (Amos 8:11-12)

False Worship Is Not Just a Religious Problem

False worship is seldom just a “religious” problem. It is founded upon a deliberate rejection of the truth and always leads to false behavior and the terrible consequences that follow. For 300 years the Northern kingdom engaged in a deeply immoral, decadent lifestyle consistent with the practices of the surrounding nations. Without question, they brought spiritual darkness upon themselves by their disobedience and sin.

The Nature of Sin

Sin carries with it two powerful factors that contribute to the darkness. First, it provides a short term “high” of sensual gratification. It is the excitement of sin that gives it an addictive power, and leads to the “bondage” of sin. Often sin becomes an addiction that cannot be forsaken and must be protected at all costs. The darkness arises because the sinner fears the loss of his/her addiction and must keep God out of the picture. Sadly, they fear the only one who could set them free, and they continue a life of willful blindness to protect that which ultimately brings great misery into their lives.

The Shame

And that brings us to the second contributing factor to the “darkness” of sin; shame. Human beings were designed for a relationship with God. When the shame of sin comes into the picture, men react by moving away from God. Shame/guilt arises because we possess sensitivity to goodness. We call it conscience. Because God is good, conscience is really an element of our sensitivity to God. When the shame of a wounded conscience

comes into the picture, we find the person reacting by going into hiding. Darkness is the result of people's guilt induced avoidance of God.

Immoral Practices

This darkness enveloped the land, and only deepened as more and more people became entangled in immoral practices. The false worship continued because it allowed the people to believe they were honoring God without having to give up their immoral lifestyle. They became adherents of what Detrich Bonhoeffer called, "Cheap Grace." Bonhoeffer described this understanding as the *justification of sin*, and contrasted it with the Biblical view of grace in which justification liberates us and delivers us from sin.

Moral Decadence and Violence

The darkness that Israel embraced was the same darkness that afflicted the world and separated it from God. Israel, whether they knew it or not, were aligning themselves with the idolatrous cultures that surrounded them. In doing so, they shared their fate. The world isn't just about decadence and license; it is also an extremely violent place.

When men open the door to moral decadence they enable the removal of conscience and compassion. The result is a world where the self is supreme and the other becomes an object to be used or to be removed if it gets in the way. Immorality and violence are connected; they are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

So, Israel was a place of moral evil and gratuitous violence. *Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria; you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!"* (Amos 4:1) Selfishness leads to a lack of concern for those outside of our network of friends and family. It opens the door to a fundamental lack of compassion (feeling with or for someone else), and an increasingly cruel and heartless environment. This is the world, and Israel in turning from God was choosing this world.

In 722 B.C. they were overrun by the Assyrian army. They had chosen the world and the world made them a visit. They will suffer the consequences for over 700 years.

The Period of Maccabees: God Working through Darkness

In the time of the Maccabees, around 200 years before the birth of Jesus, the far Northern region of Israel came under the control of Judea. Galilee became a Jewish enclave surrounded by Gentiles and Samaritans. This will be the beginning of a process of pushing back the darkness.

It will not be immediately apparent, but our God works even in the dark.

As the Judean refugees began moving into the Galilean region, a small number of them settled in a village never mentioned in the Old Testament; Nazareth. A synagogue will be built and a small enclave of Judaism will be established. History leaves us no record of how Joseph and his family, direct descendents of King David, ended up living in this remote village. We only know from the New Testament that they did. And because they did, the Light shone in the darkness.

Christ Came Into the World Just At the Right Time

Ephesians 1 tells us that Christ came into the world at just the right time (my paraphrase of Eph. 1:9-10). God was at work setting the stage for the birth of His Son, the establishment of the Church, and the spread of the Gospel. He was preparing places and He was preparing people.

The Jewish people were well aware of their spiritual destitution. It had been 400 years since the last prophet had spoken God's word to them, and they were aware that the next prophet would be more than just a prophet, he would be their messiah. Daniel promised them that Messiah would arrive in 69 weeks of years (Daniel 9:25). The people of first century Israel were infected with "Messianic Fever" in anticipation of the fulfillment of Daniel's prophesy.

The True Light

John tells us in his gospel, *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* (John 1:9-12) God sent the Light in fulfillment of His promise through Isaiah, yet not everyone was open.

Jesus is the Light. He has revealed the character of God to the world, demonstrating God's love, His authority over disease and demonic oppression, His incomparable wisdom, and His great compassion for the lost. He healed the sick and raised the dead, and yet there were people of his generation who refused to believe what their own eyes were telling them. When Jesus healed a man born blind it threw the Pharisees into a dither, *"This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."* But others asked, *"How can a sinner perform such signs?"* (John 9:16)

Why, Then, Still This Darkness?

Jesus is the Light, so how come some people still live in darkness? The truth is some people prefer the dark over the light. Jesus explained the problem, *This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their*

deeds were evil. All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. (John 3:19-20)

For all their religious credentials, the Pharisees were not as righteous as they appeared. Jesus repeatedly confronted them for their hypocrisy, whether it was the love of money (Luke 16:14), arrogance (Luke 14:7-11), and lack of compassion (Luke 11:42). The Pharisees gave several theological reasons (“No prophet arises from Galilee,” “This man is a Sabbath-breaker,” etc.) for why they rejected Jesus as Messiah, but behind it all was their desire to remain in the dark and avoid coming to the Light.

A Warning and Danger for All of Us

This is a danger for all of us, we are instructed to “love not the world,” “don’t make room for the flesh,” and “flee immorality.” We are surrounded not just by darkness but by many dark things, things that seek to entice us away from God. There is only one antidote to the dark, and that is the Light.

John writes, *If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His son, purifies us from all sin.* (I John 1:7) The integrity that is described in this passage is only possible as we live in intimacy with Jesus. He is the light and only as we live in Him can that light shine forth from our lives. Jesus told us, “You are the light of the world.” That is only possible because we live in the light of His grace.

How Christmas Affects Us Emotionally

One of the remarkable aspects of Christmas is the way it affects us emotionally. I don’t know very many people who don’t see Christmas as a special time. Movies, songs, and cards all speak of the “spirit” of Christmas, of the hope of peace on earth and goodwill among men. Even unbelievers are aware of it. I have always felt that the special joy of Christmas was God giving the world a little hint of what it is like to know Jesus.

After I first became a Christian in my sophomore year of college, my appreciation of Christmas deepened, and continues to this day. There is something uniquely powerful about this annual event. It is the day the Light shines in the midst of the darkness.

As we approach another Christmas, may we redouble our commitment to walk in His light and to shine that light to the world. Jesus is still the light, *which, coming into the world, enlightens every man* (John 1:9). We see his light all around us; in the laughter of children, the faithfulness of a friend, the sacrifices of a parent, and the joy of Christmas. For those who are open to Him, who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the light of Jesus still shines and choir of angels still sing. His light shines in each of our hearts and the peace and joy in our lives shines out to those who still hide in the shadows.

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