



A Light in Darkness

Promises of Hope

About the Story

The united kingdom of Israel was divided into two in 922 BCE, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. From that point on, north and south were constantly at war with one another over issues of theology, norms, and traditions. Both were under the threat of attack from other nations: Assyria and Babylon to the north, and Egypt to the south. Isaiah's ministry was in the southern kingdom, and at the time of this oracle, (between 742-700 BCE), the northern

kingdom had joined forces with the Syrians to remove the king of Judah, Ahaz, in an attempt to keep the Assyrians at bay. In response, King Ahaz joined with the Assyrians, going so far as to worship their pagan gods. Israel (including the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali) was then conquered by the Assyrians, and while Judah remained independent, it was also under Assyrian control. God's people were unsure of their future, and Isaiah's words offered a reminder of God's continuing care and hope.

The Point:

The prophet promises a new king who will be the presence of God's light in the world.

Throughout the world, people depend upon their leaders to act in ways that are best for their nations. As Christians, we also pray that our leaders will be beacons of God's light: bringing peace, justice, and prosperity not just to ourselves, but also to others.

Isaiah spoke poetically to the people of Judah about light shining into the darkness and joy returning to those who have been beaten down. Bringing words from God that promised hope to a people filled with anxiety, Isaiah declared that they will no longer be oppressed by an occupier (verse 4), nor shall they live in fear of "trampling boots" (verse 5). Instead, God promises they shall be delivered by (surprise!) not another conquering army, but a child who shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace (verse 6). Isaiah promised that the people of Judah who continue to have faith in God shall be given "endless peace" by a ruler descended from King David (verse 7). And just in case they are wondering how all these (wonderful) things will take place, Isaiah assures them, "the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." (verse 7).

Opening Prayer

God who shines light into darkness, illumine our hearts and minds as we gather together to study your Word. May we be bold enough to speak the truth of our hearts, and compassionate enough to hear the needs of others. May the words of the prophet Isaiah bring us to a closer understanding of who you are, and who you wish us to be. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, the prophet Amos promised the people that if they follow God faithfully, God will be gracious to them. This week, the prophet Isaiah shares God's promises of light in the midst of dark and difficult days. Next week, God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah, promising to restore the people who are in exile and bring them back home.

Into the Story

Isaiah's words to the people of Judah: "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," may sound very familiar to us—we often hear this passage during Advent and Christmas. Right now, in November, we might be more aware of anxiety, stress, and darkness than we are of light. Take a minute think of what brings you "light" when you are down. Perhaps it is your child or grandchildren, or hearing a song or driving past a place that brings up a pleasant memory. If you feel comfortable doing so, share your drawing with others, either in pairs or with the entire group.

Learning the Story

Isaiah brings God's words of light and hope to people who have been feeling abandoned and out of control.

Read Isaiah 9:1-2 – God promises light in the midst of darkness.

- ❓ Now that God is coming to transform the situation of God's people, there will be "no more time for gloom." It is not always easy to move from grief to joy. What does it feel like to be rushed from one emotion to another?
- ❓ One only sees a flashlight or a candle in the dark. How have you missed seeing God's light shining in the midst of a good day?
- ❓ God chose to shine a light on God's people who were living in the darkness of despair. If you could shine God's transforming light on any situation in the world, where would you choose? Why?

Read Isaiah 9:3-5 – In spite of experiencing oppression and war, the people of God will experience joy and liberation.

- ❓ When one is in the midst of a difficult period in life, it is hard to believe that there is joy on the other side. To whom do you turn when you need to feel hopeful?
- ❓ Before tractors were invented, farmers plowed their fields using two oxen, which had to walk together because their necks were yoked with a wooden bar across their shoulders. Have you ever felt burdened by

Bible Connections

- ✝ Psalm 27 describes God as "light and salvation" (Psalm 25:1).
- ✝ The birth of a child brings joy and laughter to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21:2-8).
- ✝ The Word of God is the light that darkness cannot overcome (John 1:1-5).

being connected to someone whose pace of life or way of thinking was different from yours? What did you do?

- 🔗 Isaiah describes quite graphically how soldiers' boots and bloody garments will be destroyed. It is not so easy for those who are veterans to get rid of memories of warfare. Have you ever talked with a person who has returned from service in war-torn areas? What do you know about their needs?

Read Isaiah 9:6-7 – Peace shall come through the birth of a child!

- 🔗 If you have ever heard the chorus “For Unto us a Child is Born” from Handel’s *Messiah*, you could sing the text of verse 6. Are there other songs that come to mind when you think about the joy of the birth of a baby?
- 🔗 For a people in the midst of war and occupation, the promise of a baby being born might have seemed like God was not paying close attention to what they needed. When have you been given a little thing—a present, a text, a wave, a smile—and it made all the difference?
- 🔗 Isaiah proclaims that God’s zeal—commitment to and passion for God’s people—is behind God’s merciful actions. What are you passionate about? How do you translate your passion into action?

Living the Story: Prayer

We use candles in many ways: to represent the presence of the Spirit of God in worship, to symbolize our remembrance of an event or person, to bring elegance or romance to a dinner table, or to make our way around our houses in the dark when the electricity fails. Candles, whether lit with flames or with batteries, can also be captivating vehicles for meditative prayer.

Supplies

- Candle and matches or battery-operated candle

Sit in a circle and take several deep breaths in and out. When you are ready, light or turn on a candle and hold it in your hand or place it on the table in front of you. Take two to three minutes and watch the flame of the candle. Let your mind wander to times when you have needed God’s light in your life. Do not worry if your thoughts stray, just bring yourself and your breathing back to the flickering flame. When the meditation time is over, sit back in your seats, close your eyes, and say a silent prayer. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Bible Nuts & Bolts: The Messiah

“Messiah” is a word in Hebrew for “anointed,” typically referring to someone who has been chosen (anointed) by God to care for a God’s people. The Greek translation of this term is “Christos.” Because the writers of the New Testament only had access to the Hebrew Bible in a Greek translation called the Septuagint, when they wanted to refer to Jesus as the one who was chosen by God, they used the term “Christ.”

Closing Prayer

Stand in a circle, or move your chairs in such a way that you are in a slightly different “space” than where you were for today’s study. If all are comfortable, hold one another’s hands; if not, imagine you are connected by an invisible string. Take a moment to look around at everyone, and thank God, aloud or in silence, for the light that has been shared with you today.

At Home

- ✝ This time of year it is easy to get so wrapped up in our own lives that we do not notice the needs of others. Take some time this week to pay attention to the people you see every day. Who needs encouragement? Who needs to know that they are valued?
- ✝ People who live with depression are especially vulnerable as the days get shorter. One of the easiest ways to be helpful is to turn on the lights! Walking outside when the sun is shining is another important way to combat feelings of hopelessness and sorrow.
- ✝ Is there a Bible story or passage that you think of when you are sad or lonely? Tell someone else about your experience, and how the Word of God makes a difference.

Daily Readings

Sunday—Read Isaiah 9:1-7

Through the birth of a child, God will bring light and truth to people who have been in darkness. First-time parents can often experience more stress than joy as they learn to care for a new baby. Find a way to support new parents in your community, perhaps simply providing a meal.

Monday—Read Isaiah 9:8-21

God promises to destroy the people who brought destruction on the people of Judah. It was probably quite comforting to them to believe that God “had their backs.” How might you ask God to help you turn an enemy into a friend?

Tuesday—Read Isaiah 11:1-9

Isaiah describes a “peaceful kingdom,” in which even wolves and lambs get along together. Spend some time in prayer for someone with whom you have not been getting along. Ask God to help you find a new way of relating to one another.

Wednesday—Read Jeremiah 1:4-19

Although Jeremiah does not think he is ready, God sends him to speak words of challenge to those who will not want to hear, and promises to sustain him. Ask God to give you the right words to say in a difficult situation today.

Thursday—Read Jeremiah 25:1-14

After years of trying to get them to change their ways, God has run out of patience for the people of Judah. Has God been trying to entice you to make better decisions? Why not start now?

Friday—Read Jeremiah 27:1-22

God tells the people that they should not listen to prophets who tell them what they want to hear; they are going to remain in exile for the next 70 years. If you encounter someone who feels “stuck” in an unhappy situation, even though you cannot rescue them, you can still give them words of comfort and hope!

Saturday—Read 2 Kings 25:1-21

The people of God see their holy place destroyed and are sent into exile. If God had a hand in this, God must still be with them. It can be hard to see God’s presence in the midst of a difficult situation. Looking back on your life, can you see when God has been with you in past difficult times?