

Isaiah 9:1-7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 9 verses 1 to 7 Isaiah chapter 9 And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it, with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. In Isaiah chapter 9, a passage associated with the period of the Syro-Ephraimite War of 736 to 732 BC, whether in the middle of the war or at its end, we are presented with a vision of the restored fortunes of the beleaguered nation of Judah.

Over a land formerly shrouded in the darkness of war and its aftermath, a new dawn has risen and the birth of a child heralds a new age of national prosperity. The scene for this passage is set by the preceding chapter, within which a period of gloom and silence is described.

During this period of silence, God's word is not heard. Held in suspense, the prophet and his disciples withdraw into a sort of hibernation, waiting for divine revelation to break the winter of the nation's suffering.

[2 : 13] We see this in chapter 8, verses 16 to 18. Among their contemporaries, there would be those tempted to search out other forms of revelation, forms of revelation that would drive them into the deepest darkness.

In verse 22, Unlike those in the nation who pursued false gods and mediums, a glorious new dawn has come for those who waited for the Lord. In verses familiar from many nativity plays, and most memorably presented in Handel's Messiah, the prophet declares that the people who walked in darkness had seen a great light.

This new dawn arose in the very regions of northern Israel, first and next by Tiglath-Pileser III, Naphtali and Zebulun, expressed in a form akin to that of a thanksgiving hymn.

The prophet's announcement of the reversal of Judah's circumstances is compared not only to a great dawn, but also to the joy of harvest and the celebrations that follow a decisive victory over an oppressor, the bringing in of a new era of peace.

The event that has led to this celebration is the birth of a child, a crown prince and an heir to the throne of David. Verses 6-7 may take a form related to that of a coronation ceremony, the names of verse 6, wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace, being honorific titles given to the new ruler on such an occasion.

[3 : 36] The sign of David's heir is an auspicious indicator of the positive destiny for a formerly oppressed nation, a galvanisation of its sovereignty, and a promise of its enjoyment of peace in the years to come.

This child is often identified with Hezekiah. Themes of new birth are common within scriptural narratives. At key moments in the biblical narratives and the story of the people of the Lord, a new dawn is seen to arrive with the birth of a child through divine favour and promise, shattering the gloom of a form of darkness and serving as a propitious sign of a future that breaks with the oppression of the past.

This is most notably seen at the beginning of the book of Exodus, in 1 Samuel, and later in the book of Luke. In each of these books we see an emphasis upon the labour of women and the manner in which they and the children that they bear are the means by which a new hope arrives.

Such themes are scattered throughout the book of Isaiah, but perhaps most prominently in the two preceding chapters. In chapters 7 verses 14 to 16 and chapter 8 verses 1 to 4, newborn children serve as signs of divine favour and coming deliverance.

The children of a nascent generation represent the horizon upon which the light of a glorious new day is beginning to break. Later on in chapter 11, infants and young children are integral to Isaiah's vision of a promised era of miraculous peace, of a time when the little child leads lions, where nursing children play by the cobra's hole, and weaned children put their hands in vipers' dens.

[5 : 09] In chapter 11 verses 6 to 9, The frequency of metaphors of God's mother and father-like care and provision for his people in the wider context of the book of Isaiah is also worth noting.

It highlights both the radical dependency and radical provision that are integral to many biblical visions of God's promised future. The fragility of the purchase that the promise seems to have upon the future is well illustrated by the weakness, vulnerability and dependence of an infant.

The future that the child represents is still so far off, and many challenges and difficulties lie between the present and that distant prospect. The child, the embodiment of the nation's hopes, must be protected and nurtured for many years before the future that he stands for can ever be realised.

God's gift of a child is both a foretaste of the promised future and a commitment to provide in the interim. The birth of a child, and most particularly a royal child, has the power to stand for a distant future, to draw people's attention, even a whole nation's, to a time beyond that in which they currently find themselves.

Like the first shaft of the light of a coming day, the beginning of such a life in our midst invites us all to reflect upon the possibilities, promise and peril of a time where all that will remain of us is our legacy and memory.

[6 : 29] In this infant, in all of his vulnerability, we see a bridge between our time and one which is to come, a piece of us that will remain. Children can awaken us to the question of what we will leave behind when we are gone.

Children can also serve as sources of hope, holding open the possibility of a future in which many of the hostilities, fears and prejudices of our own age will be overcome, a closing of old chapters and a chance to start afresh.

The role of infants and young children as prophetic signs that we see in the book of Isaiah is not without parallel in our own day and age. As in Isaiah's day, infants are like windows onto a time that offers new light and perspective upon and hope within our own.

In their very weakness, children alert us to the precariousness of the future itself. In their helplessness, they remind us both of our responsibility to them and of our radical dependence upon God.

In Jesus Christ, God has given us a sign of the child in the midst of us all. Isaiah chapter 9 verses 1 to 7 has long been read as a text foretelling the coming of Christ.

[7 : 36] In the infant Jesus, the day spring of God has visited us, the one in whom the night and all of its shadows will finally dissolve into perfect day. Like Anna and Simeon in the temple in Luke chapter 2, in the fragile and dependent infant Jesus, we are called by faith to see the assurance of the fullness of God's future.

In considering the vulnerable infancy of Jesus, we might also be reminded of the committed fatherhood of God, a God who will nurture and protect the seeds of a promised future until the time when, with the final arrival of his peaceable kingdom, the earth is filled with their rich fruit.

A people that operates in terms of this will find itself empowered with the profoundest hope. In the newborn child of Bethlehem, God's light has dawned in our darkness. The first shards of an eternal day break upon the eastern horizon, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Happy Christmas!