

# *The Soul Felt Its Worth*

## **WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

3<sup>rd</sup> in a four-week series

December 12, 2021

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*Isaiah 9:1–2, 6–7 (NIV)*

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—

<sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. . . .

<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>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 40:1–11 (NIV)*

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her  
that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup>A voice of one calling:

"In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.

<sup>5</sup>And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

*Isaiah 52:7–10 (NIV)*

<sup>7</sup>How beautiful on the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring good news,  
who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation,  
who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

<sup>8</sup>Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;  
together they shout for joy.

When the LORD returns to Zion,  
they will see it with their own eyes.

<sup>9</sup>Burst into songs of joy together,  
you ruins of Jerusalem,  
for the LORD has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

<sup>10</sup>The LORD will lay bare his holy arm  
in the sight of all the nations,  
and all the ends of the earth will see  
the salvation of our God.

*Mark 1:1–8 (NIV)*

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, <sup>2</sup> as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way” —  
<sup>3</sup> “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’ ”

<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

### *The true story*

**God speaks to us across the ages with words of warning and hope, of caution and salvation. Beginning with the prophet Amos and continuing more than five centuries to Malachi, these words were written down, collected, edited, and then copied as they passed from generation. So, they even come to us now, shaping our understanding of our times and, most importantly, helping to form the truth of Jesus and God’s great rescue plan. For example, the great scroll of Isaiah has shaped our understanding of Jesus more than any other OT writing. Indeed, it is the scroll from which Jesus read when he began his public ministry.**

For two millennia, the scroll of Isaiah has been enormously influential in shaping Christian theology. And as with the entire biblical library, today’s passages from Isaiah will be much more meaningful to us if we put them in some context. However, it is very likely that Isaiah of 700 BC did not write the entire book that you and I know as the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah consists of two portions. So-called “First Isaiah,” chapters 1-39, was written by the prophet Isaiah more than 700 years before Jesus, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians. Isaiah warns the people of Judah that the same ruin will befall them unless they turn back to God. Judah’s fall is not immediate. Nonetheless, Jerusalem burned to the ground about 150 years later at the hands of the Babylonians.

There are passages of hope in “first Isaiah” in addition to the words of warning. Some of Isaiah’s messages look ahead to a time when all of God’s people would be restored under God’s rule. The prophet looked ahead to the coming of God’s kingdom, when all things would be put right.

So-called “Second Isaiah,” chapters 40-66, was written during the time of the exile, after the Babylonians overran the kingdom and burned Jerusalem and the temple in 587BC. It is hard to overstate the darkness of the exile. In the midst of the Jews’ crushing pain and despair, another prophet, writing in the name of the great prophet Isaiah, brought the Jews comforting promises of a time when God would raise up a Savior who would usher in God’s rule. And the Jewish community heard in these words the sacred and inspired word of God. These were tangible promises of hope and restoration brought in a time of utter darkness when all seemed lost. And these writings were taken by the Jewish community as sacred and inspired.

Thus, the reference to the “ruins of Jerusalem” in 52:9 above is concrete, speaking of a realized horror. The Jews looked forward to the day when God would come to their rescue, when he would “bare his holy arm.” On that day, God would roll up his sleeves

and get to work. All the world would see that God is God. Can we even imagine a bigger day!

Thus, the prophet uses an image of lookouts posted on mountains. The lookouts are to signal the instant that God appears on the horizon. God is riding to rescue not only his people, but all the world. "The ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." The fact that passages from Isaiah such as this one from chapter 52 were written during the exile makes them immeasurably more real and meaningful to me.

Isaiah uses the image of the Lord baring his arm for all the world to see. Though Isaiah surely means this as an image of power, in a Christmas sermon N.T. Wright sees something more in the bare arm:

"But see the arm of the Lord stretched out, bare and helpless, in the manger; listen to the word made flesh, gaze upon the incarnate glory, fill your mind with wisdom in person -- and suddenly the language of adoration makes a whole lot of sense. . . . And our innate desire to see the world put to rights kindles again to a passion when we realize that:

'This little Babe so few days old,  
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;  
All hell doth at his presence quake,  
Though he himself for cold do shake;  
For in this weak, unarmed wise,  
The gates of hell he will surprise.' [from Robert Southwell's poem, "New Heaven, New War"]

He reaches out his naked arms towards the world with love and power; and shall we not adore him? Shall we not join in his work in the world? Shall we not in turn find ourselves caught up, as we receive him and believe in his name, in ourselves becoming children of God, charged with the same mission of peace and mercy and reconciliation? Shall we not greet him this day as we meet him, and bless as we understand, on this Christ's Mass of all days? Shall we not give him glory? Shall we not come and adore him? "The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."

And these stirring words bring us to Advent, for God is on the horizon, striding into view, incarnate and born to a very young Galilean woman.

### *Advent*

"Advent" comes from the Latin, *advenire*, meaning "arrival." The advent season is a time of preparation for an arrival. But of what . . . or of whom?

It is easy to see Advent as a time of preparation for, well . . . Christmas morning. Shopping, food, trees, parties, decorations, and all the rest. Sometimes it seems almost overwhelming, crowding out anything resembling a Lenten time of preparation.

But when we step back for a moment, we remember that Christmas is actually about Jesus. So, in a way we'd be right to see the "arrival" as the birth of the baby Jesus. But we'd still be falling short of the larger story.

### *How Good the News?*

The light seems brightest when we step out of a dark room. The thrill of victory is made sweeter by the agony of defeat. I could go on piling up clichés, for we all know that Good News is better appreciated by those who acknowledge they really need some good news. So it is with God's Good News.

The opening verses of Isaiah 40 are beautiful, but they are most thrilling for those who desperately seek comfort. These words were written for the Jews living in exile. They had lost everything and they believed that this had happened because of their own failings. These are words of hope for people who had none. But we don't have to look

that far back to appreciate these words. Whenever I come to Isaiah 40, I invariably recall a story I was once told by someone who should know.

In the early 60's, the Robert Shaw chorale was set to perform Handel's *Messiah*<sup>1</sup> in a large southern city, at a large all-white church. In the sanctuary, there were some seats set off to one side that were to be used by any black people who might want to attend. The entire sanctuary was full when it came time for the performance to begin.

After the orchestra finished its prelude, the tenor stepped forward to sing the opening aria. But he didn't stop at the usual spot on the stage. Instead, the tenor walked across the sanctuary and stood in front of the "colored section." There, he began to sing, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God . . ." For Charles Jennens had chosen the opening verses of Isaiah 40 to begin his libretto, *Messiah*, set to music by George Frideric Handel, and first performed in Dublin on April 13, 1742.

I grew up in the deep South. I remember three restrooms in every grocery store – men, women, and colored; two water fountains; two waiting rooms at the doctor's office; the special section in the back of Shreveport's trolleys. To my shame, I remember that I was indifferent as a boy, blind to it all. It was simply the way things were. But looking back, I know that no one in that Atlanta sanctuary could have been unaffected by the tenor's enactment of God's words.

Good News is like that. It can hit us hard, open our eyes, move our hearts. And its arrival often catches us by surprise, like a bolt of lightning. Much as did the arrival of John the Baptizer at the Jordan.

#### *John the Baptizer*

Mark, the evangelist, was a consummate storyteller and prepares the reader for what lies ahead. He gives away the ending at the beginning! We are about to hear the Good News of Jesus the Messiah ("Christ" is simply the Greek word for "Messiah"). Most of the characters in Mark's drama won't understand that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, but we are told right up front. To make sure we "get it," Mark then quotes Isaiah's promise of one who would "prepare the way of the Lord."

With the words of Isaiah 40 ringing in our ears, we then meet John the baptizer, who is gathering together all the lost in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance. It is as if he says, "Turn away from your wanderings! Look. The Lord is coming!" Dressed like the prophet Elijah,<sup>2</sup> John points the crowds to someone who is even more powerful, who will baptize, not with water like John, but with the Holy Spirit. The crowds don't know that it is Jesus to whom John points, but we, the listeners do, thanks to Mark's beginning. Though no one other than Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him, we see it. Only we and Jesus hear God's call to his beloved Son.

#### *Are we prepared for the truth?*

It is striking to me that Mark's prologue prepares us for Jesus' public ministry but not for his crucifixion. Mark tells us right up front that Jesus is the God's Messiah and Son. Thus, we aren't surprised when Jesus performs miracles or restores life or casts out demons. But nothing here prepares us for Jesus' humiliating and lonely death. It is as if Jesus' entire 2½ year journey begins and ends in the wilderness. It is God's Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (v. 12) and it is God who saves Jesus from the wilderness of his crucifixion by raising him from the dead, pushing him forward into new life.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to know that the libretto for *Messiah* consists solely of Scripture passages. *Messiah* opens with a tenor aria, set to today's reading from Isaiah 40: "Comfort ye my people."

<sup>2</sup> In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah wears a garment made of hair and a leather belt. The Jews expected that Elijah would return from the heavens to announce the arrival of God's Messiah.

Thus it is with us. We live in a wilderness that is too often of our own creation. Yet, Jesus meets us there. In him, we are reborn. We are strengthened and renewed. The world may still be a wilderness filled with temptations to turn away from God, but we are prepared so that, by the power of Christ, we can face life's temptations and trials yet remain a faithful people.

### *Cosmic lightning*

God visits earth. That's the arrival for which we prepare during Advent. That's the Good News. Sure, the Jews had believed that God had been present with them, that the Holiest of Holies in the temple was the place heaven and earth met. But God hadn't been with them in this way – a small, screaming, sometimes smelly baby lying in some straw amidst a bunch of animals and shepherds. Who could ever conceive of such a thing? What does it say about God? About us?

God in a manger. God arriving to fulfill every promise God had ever made. God arriving to remake, restore, and renew his distorted creation. To make all things new, even you and me. It's bigger than Christmas. Even bigger than Easter. The arrival is as big as God himself.

### Darkness and Light

Today's passage from Isaiah begins with the image of a people in darkness. The darkness, the absence of light, is a physical and spiritual reality in the Bible. Darkness is also an apt symbol of some of the most profound human experiences. "With approximately two hundred references, darkness is a major actor in the biblical drama."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most intriguing is this. Unlike virtually all other biblical images, darkness is unambiguously negative. There are no good aspects or manifestations of darkness in the Bible. Perhaps it is reasonable to be afraid of the dark!

From its literal beginning, the Bible depicts the on-going struggle of the light to overcome the darkness. "Let there be light!" is God's first act of creation. And the conquering of the darkness begins. If darkness is ignorance, then the light is understanding (Psalm 82:5). If the light is goodness, darkness is the evil acts of those who oppose God (Proverbs 2:13). If light enables us to see who God is, then the darkness makes us blind (Matthew 6:22-23).

In the New Testament, darkness is very much a spiritual reality. Jesus speaks of the "power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). For Paul, the world is divided into the "children of light" and the "children of darkness" (1 Thess. 5:5).

In contrast, the light is both life-giving and protective. It represents goodness and blessing. Light is the symbol of truth. God himself is light. The church is a community of light, made up of disciples who are to be the light to the world.

It isn't hard to see how the light becomes a symbol of salvation. Redemption consists of emerging from the darkness into the light. Further, the struggle between light and darkness is never a battle of equals. If, as John says, Jesus is the "true light, which enlightens the world," then the only question is when the darkness will fully and finally be overcome, and that will be with Christ's second coming.

1. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* entry on "darkness."

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus.*

This class will not meet on December 13.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

**Scott's Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week: We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.