

The Light to Come

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st of a four-part series

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Job 9:25–33 (CEB)

²⁵ My days are swifter than a runner;
they flee and don't experience good.

²⁶ They sweep by like ships made of
reeds,
as an eagle swoops on prey.

²⁷ If I say, "I'll forget my lament,
put on a different face so I can smile,"

²⁸ I'm still afraid of all my suffering;

I know that you
won't declare me innocent.

²⁹ I myself am thought guilty;
why have I tried so hard in vain?

³⁰ If I wash myself with snow,

purify my hands with soap,

³¹ then you'll hurl me into a slimy pit
so that my clothes detest me.

³² God is not a man like me—
someone I could answer—
so that we could come together in
court.

³³ Oh, that there were a mediator
between us;
he would lay his hand on both of us,

Isaiah 9:2, 6–7 (NIV)

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

Jeremiah 33:14–16 (NIV)

¹⁴ "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good promise I
made to the people of Israel and Judah.

¹⁵ "In those days and at that time
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;
he will do what is just and right in the land.

¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved
and Jerusalem will live in safety.

This is the name by which it will be called:
The LORD Our Righteous Savior."

Micah 5:2–5a (CEB)

² As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant
of Judah's forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel
on my behalf
will come out from you.

His origin is from remote times,
from ancient days.

³ Therefore, he will give them up
until the time when
she who is in labor gives birth.
The rest of his kin will return

to the people of Israel.

⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name
of the LORD his God.

They will dwell secure,
because he will surely become great
throughout the earth;

⁵ he will become one of peace.

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

We've all seen the cartoon. A lone figure with bushy hair, a scraggly beard, dressed in rags standing on a street corner holding a sign reading, "Repent! The end is near!" This political season, I've heard more than few speeches referred to as "jeremiads" meaning a list of woes and complaints often delivered in a tirade. And yes, it is a reference to Jeremiah. It isn't really unfair because Jeremiah was given the weighty task of telling God's people that the end was upon them, that they were headed over the cliff. They had passed the point of return; there was nothing that would forestall the looming disaster. And it all came to be. The Babylonians rolled over Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. There was no darker moment in Israel's history.

But sadly, all we often hear about is Jeremiah the so-called prophet of doom and gloom; never, Jeremiah the prophet of hope. In the depth of Israel's despair, as they anticipated rebuilding shattered lives a thousand miles from home, as they tried to hang on to one another and to the LORD God, Jeremiah brought them a message of hope, of promises kept, of a new covenant.

This new covenant would represent the movement from darkness into light, as Isaiah had so poetically expressed it. Yet, reading the OT prophets can be pretty difficult. One of the problems is that they seem to talk about future events as if they had already happened! Look at Isaiah 9:6-7, "a child *has been* born . . . a son *given* . . . he *is* named . . . he *will* establish." Past, present, and future – it's all here!

The prophets understood that God's promises were not possibilities, they were certainties. With God, a promise made is a promise that has already been kept. God speaks and things simply . . . are. Even as the Jews lived in exile, Jeremiah knew that God had spoken the new covenant into existence.

Thus, when the Israelites faced dark times, the prophets would paint word-pictures of the light that lay ahead. The exact shape of the light might not have been always clear, but the truth of God's light, his commitment to his promises, was always there . . . like a light at the end of the tunnel.

Isaiah 9:6-7 speaks of a promised child entrusted with the authority of God who would usher in God's kingdom, the time when God would reign over the affairs of all people with justice and righteousness. In that time, God would again be with his people as he once had been with them in the Garden of Eden. Hence, one name given the child is Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14), which means "God-with-us" in Hebrew. This child was and is and will be "Wonderful Counselor . . . Mighty God . . . Prince of Peace." And this child, this "son of the Most High," would be born to a young woman, a girl really, from a small Jewish village, far from Jerusalem.

If only

We live in times when too many think that the solutions to the world manifold lie within ourselves. But history tells a different story. Oct 7 in Israel is only the latest tragic and terrifying demonstration of brokenness and sin, But what if there were another way? What if it wasn't up to us? What if there was someone to lead us out of the darkness and into the light?

That is the plaintive cry on Job's lips (9:33) . . . *if only*. Job's world had fallen in him. He had lost his family, his home, his wealth, even his health. And he had no idea why. His friends had assumed that Job had done something to offend God, thus earning God's wrath. And if not Job, then it must have been someone in his family. But his friends were wrong. Job had done no wrong; he was innocent. Yet one horror after another befell him. He wants an answer . . . from God. But he believes that there can be no such conversation. Isn't God far removed from Job? Surely he can't answer like a man could answer Job. And so Job pleads for, dreams of, a mediator. Someone who could bridge the gap. Someone who could enable a conversation between a man and his maker. *If only . . .*

And so we come to Christmas. God made flesh, born to a woman like you and me. The mediator Job longed for. The savior Job could hardly imagine. In much the same way, the prophet Isaiah anticipates a day of rescue, a day that would belong to a Wonderful Counselor, a Prince of Peace. Take a moment and read back over the passage from Isaiah in the light of the Hamas attacks on Israel. Here are some reflections from Gene Tucker of Candler Seminary on Isaiah's poem.

One important way to reflect on this poem is to consider the power of its graphic images, each with its accompanying mood and tone. First, there are the contrasting images of darkness and light (9:2). Darkness is a metaphor for depression and death. The NEB makes that explicit in the final line: "dwellers in a land as dark as death" (cf. Ps 23:4). Light symbolizes life and joy, and evokes them as well.

Second, in the language of prayer, the prophet sketches a scene of celebration. One can almost see and hear the festivities. People shout and sing to their God, as if it were the thanksgiving festival at the end of a good harvest or the spontaneous expression of joy when a war has ended and a time of peace begun.

Third, contrasting images again come to the fore, the harsh pictures of the instruments of war and oppression, on the one hand, and a gathering lighted by a fire in which those instruments are burned, on the other hand. The mood of joy and celebration from the previous images continues. What begins as the deliverance from a particular oppressor—doubtless the heel of Assyria—becomes a vision of perpetual peace: military boots and bloody uniforms are burned.

Fourth, we see a messenger emerging from the royal palace with the good news that a son—a crown prince—has been born. This birth announcement is the central scene of the poem. Like the symbolic action reports in the immediate context in the book of Isaiah (7:10–16; 8:1–4), the birth of a baby is a sign of God's saving activity on behalf of the people of God.

Finally, and with no dramatic transition, the scene shows us the future, moving to the throne room of the king and even beyond. The newborn baby is now shown to be the righteous and just king, sitting on the throne of David. This son of David will administer justice, establish righteousness, and inaugurate a reign of peace, all of which corresponds to the will of God and thus will extend forever.

Do images such as these have any power? We know they can change moods and feelings, and that alone is powerful. Good news is communicated not only by what is said but also by how it is said, by establishing a mood of celebration, and these images do just that. Can they change external realities as well? It would be naive, of course, to think that images alone, however compelling, could change the world, could lead to peace instead of war, to justice instead of oppression. Deliberation, planning, and hard work are required. But images, like ideas and commitments, fuel the imagination, which stimulates planning and action. Such a day of peace and justice as envisioned in this text may never come, but it certainly will not if there is no image drawing people toward it.¹

Like Job, Isaiah knew that the world could not stay as it was, that God would act to rescue, to redeem, and to restore his creation. They and all the prophets lived in the light of the Incarnation, though they couldn't really comprehend it at the time. In this way, all the prophets tell one long story of Advent and Christmas, including even the story of a village just south of Jerusalem.

Bethlehem's story

For a place that is well-known worldwide, Bethlehem was very unremarkable for much of its history. Located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem on the watershed that separates fertile Israel from the Judean desert, the town's name means "house of bread." Like Jerusalem, Bethlehem sits about 2,500 feet above sea level.

Before the time of Israel's kings, Bethlehem was the home of the Levite who acted as a priest for a man named Micah (not the prophet by the same name) (see Judges 17:7–13). Bethlehem was also the home of the concubine who is murdered in a story reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah, triggering a massacre at Gibeah (Judges 19–20).

¹ Tucker, G. M. (1994–2004). The Book of Isaiah 1–39. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 6, pp. 123–124). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Bethlehem also played a prominent place in the story of Ruth, as it was the home of Boaz and the place Ruth and Naomi would settle.

But Bethlehem becomes a town of lasting significance in the story of David, for it was the home of David's family (1 Samuel 16:4; 17:12) and the place where, about 1000 years before Jesus, Samuel anoints David as king of the united Israel and successor to Saul. Thus, when God promises David that a king from his family will always sit on the throne of Israel (2 Samuel 7), Bethlehem becomes the ancestral home of Israel's rightful monarchs.

The promised Messiah

Today's passage from Micah speaks to the promise of a savior from Bethlehem, one of the Christian church's most prominent and well-known Messianic prophecies.

Micah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah more than 700 years before Jesus, when it seemed that the great Assyrian empire would soon crush Judah just as they had crushed the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophecy regarding Bethlehem is part of a longer passage focused upon the rescue of Judah.

As with the other messianic promises, the question isn't only what it means to us, but what it meant to those for whom it was first intended. The question is this: Is Micah speaking only of a coming deliverer and Messiah, namely Jesus, or is he speaking of an earthly king who will turn back the oppressors? Daniel Simundson puts it this way:

"So some would say that the coming king is obviously Jesus. The prophecy looks forward to his birth or, perhaps, to his second coming, when the time of waiting will be over and the reign of God will finally be achieved in all its glory. Others say that the text is obviously talking about an earthly king. After they return from exile, God will reestablish the monarchy in a restored capital of Jerusalem. Up to the present time, this has not happened. Although the city and the Temple were rebuilt, never again has a son of David ruled as king in Jerusalem."²

But the best response to the question is to proclaim that Jesus is *both*. He is Israel's long-awaited Messiah³ and deliverer, an earthly king . . . but also far more.

Because Jesus was crucified as a failed messiah, it can be hard to understand him as an earthly king. But King Herod certainly feared an earthly rival. Matthew tells us that Herod heeds Micah's prophecies about a king to be born in Bethlehem and orders the massacre of all the male infants in the village when the wise men come bringing word of such a birth.

Granted, Jesus didn't do or say the things that people expected a messiah to do or say. Granted, Pilate and the Jewish leaders put Jesus to death, something that seemed to mean Jesus couldn't have been God's Messiah. Nonetheless, Jesus' resurrection showed that Herod had good reason to fear the birth in Bethlehem, as do all bringers of injustice and oppression.

You can't judge a book by its cover

From all outward appearances, Bethlehem was just a quiet town south of Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph seemed to be nothing more than a peasant couple giving birth under very difficult circumstances. Jesus was just a baby . . . wealth is power, greed is good, a gun is strength. All this is what we would see if we looked only at the world's "cover." But we would be wrong. Appearances can deceive. Bethlehem was the birth place of God's Messiah. Mary was the God-bearer. The baby was God incarnate . . . forgiveness is power, generosity is good, kindness is strength.

²From Simundson's commentary on Micah in *The New Interpreter's Bible* series.

³All this becomes clearer when we remember that "Messiah" was a royal designation. The Messiah was to be a deliverer and king, from the house of David, who would usher in God's reign.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Numbers*

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

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *2 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line 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. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This Sunday: Week 2 of *Shepherds to Sugarplums*

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

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.