

# *An Early Christmas*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2<sup>nd</sup> in a four-part series

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*Job 9:25–33 (CEB)*

<sup>25</sup> My days are swifter than a runner;  
they flee and don't experience good.  
<sup>26</sup> They sweep by like ships made of reeds,  
as an eagle swoops on prey.  
<sup>27</sup> If I say, "I'll forget my lament,  
put on a different face so I can smile,"  
<sup>28</sup> I'm still afraid of all my suffering;  
I know that you  
won't declare me innocent.  
<sup>29</sup> I myself am thought guilty;  
why have I tried so hard in vain?

*Isaiah 9:2–7 (CEB)*

<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light.  
On those living in a pitch-dark land,  
light has dawned.  
<sup>3</sup> You have made the nation great;  
you have increased its joy.  
They rejoiced before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as those who divide plunder rejoice.  
<sup>4</sup> As on the day of Midian,  
you've shattered the yoke  
that burdened them,  
the staff on their shoulders,  
and the rod of their oppressor.  
<sup>5</sup> Because every boot  
of the thundering warriors,  
and every garment rolled in blood

*Micah 5:2–5a (CEB)*

<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> Therefore, he will give them up  
until the time when  
she who is in labor gives birth.

<sup>30</sup> If I wash myself with snow,  
purify my hands with soap,  
<sup>31</sup> then you'll hurl me into a slimy pit  
so that my clothes detest me.  
<sup>32</sup> God is not a man like me—  
someone I could answer—  
so that we could come together in court.  
<sup>33</sup> Oh, that there were a mediator  
between us;  
he would lay his hand on both of us,

will be burned, fuel for the fire.  
<sup>6</sup> A child is born to us,  
a son is given to us,  
and authority will be on his shoulders.  
He will be named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.  
<sup>7</sup> There will be vast authority  
and endless peace  
for David's throne  
and for his kingdom,  
establishing and sustaining it  
with justice and righteousness  
now and forever.  
The zeal of the LORD of heavenly forces  
will do this.

The rest of his kin will return  
to the people of Israel.  
<sup>4</sup> 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;  
<sup>5</sup> he will become one of peace.

*Do you remember wanting Christmas to come early?  
God's people waited for millennia to see "a great light."*

As I write this, it is the Monday morning after the horrific attack in Paris. The world has always been in dire need of rescue. The entire twentieth century is one long testament to that truth. Sadly, the Paris attack is just the latest reminder that much of this world and many of the people in it walk in the darkness. Left to our ways, our own abilities and aspirations, we would forever stumble from one horror to another, some threatening our very existence. But what if . . .

## *If only*

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 Paris attacks. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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). 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."<sup>2</sup>

But the best response to the question is to proclaim that Jesus is *both*. He is Israel's long-awaited Messiah<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

<sup>3</sup>All 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.

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.

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

### Darkness and Light

From its 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.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What if Jesus had not been born? Where would we be in the biblical story? Try to imagine the course of human history if there had been no Jesus.
2. In what ways do you see Christmas, and, hence, the Christ, changing the world? What would you say to someone who told that if Christmas were really a true story, the world would have more to show for it?
3. The biblical use of light and darkness works on many levels. What is the darkness in your own life? Perhaps it is a health problem of a loved one or even yourself. Perhaps it is an addiction that threatens your life and your loved ones. Perhaps your darkness is a growing sense that the priorities in your life are messed up. How are you dealing with the "darkness" of an economic recession? What are you learning about your own faith? Perhaps you are coming to realize that you go days without ever even thinking of God. How does Jesus and the Good News about Jesus bring light to this darkness?

# Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Isaiah 11:1-11</b> A branch from Jesse (David's father) will wear a belt of righteousness and faithfulness.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Isaiah 40:1-11</b> A stirring proclamation of the arrival of a savior.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Isaiah 61:1-14; Luke 4:14-21</b> The arrival of the kingdom of God</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Isaiah 64:1-9</b> God – Now is the time. Make your name known!</p>
<p><b>Friday, Psalm 25:1-10</b> A personal appeal for salvation</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

