

Session 11

Isaiah 9:1-7 | Light to Galilee and the Child of Peace

Isaiah Oracle by Oracle / Dr. Randy White

- Chapter 8 ended ominously: “trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish” (8:22) would come upon the land.
- Chapter 9 turns that darkness to hope.

Dimness and affliction in Zebulun and Naphtali (vv.1-5)

- Verse 1 describes the previous “vexation” of darkness and distress in the closing verses of chapter 8.
 - Historically, this points to the northern tribes, summarized in Zebulun and Naphtali, who were exposed to Assyrian invasion; Tiglath-pileser took Galilee and “all the land of Naphtali” (2 Kings 15:29).
 - The *more grievous* affliction came later, when Assyria besieged Samaria, carried Israel away, and deported them into Assyria (2 Kings 17:5-6).
 - While this historically refers to the Assyrian affliction of Israel, Matthew 4:15-16 ties this in with the Messiah, and Luke 1:79 gives the same light/darkness theme. Therefore, the “He” of verse 1 is ultimately the LORD, with Assyria as the historical instrument (compare 10:5).
- Verse 1 has an interpretive issue that affects the way the verse is read:
 - The KJV and the Chabad translation have a *lighter punishment followed by heavier punishment* view, while modern translations take a *former humiliation followed by later honor* view. These are clearly two different views.
 - See, for example, the ESV: “In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea.”
 - The Hebrew word in question, *kabad*, can mean both “to make heavy” and “to cause to be honored.”
 - Matthew 4:15-16 quotes these verses, but actually skips the portion in question (*and afterward did more grievously afflict her*).
 - My view: while the later honor is certainly part of this verse prophetically, I prefer the historical grounding of the later heaviness, and I have greater trust in the KJV translators than in newer translations.
- The words “in Galilee of the nations” must also be considered more deeply.
 - The Hebrew phrase is “*gelil ha-goyim*.”
 - The word *galil*, when transliterated, is the name of a place: Galilee.
 - The word *galil*, when translated, means a “circle or circuit.”
 - It could be *translated* in the sense of a region that *attracts* or “*rolls in*” the nations and be a reference both to the Syrians and later Assyrians and also to the future gathering of the nations in Galilee at the Battle of Armageddon, though the Armageddon

- connection should be taken as a theological application rather than the plain lexical meaning.
- The *English translation of the entire Tanakh* on *chabad.org* translates as “the attraction of the nations.”
 - Matthew 4:15 retains the word “Galilee,” and Isaiah 9:1 is undoubtedly referring to this region, but the reference could be a picture of the past, present, and future “attraction” of the entire circle of the land of Israel.
 - Verse 2 speaks of “people that walked in darkness” who “have seen a great light.” These same people were living “in the land of the shadow of death” and “upon them hath the light shined.”
 - The grammar contains a mixture of ongoing action and completed action.
 - “walked” is past tense in English, but the Hebrew has a participial sense: *the people who are walking*, while “have seen” is a Hebrew perfect, presenting the act as completed.
 - “that dwell” is present, while “light shined” is a Hebrew perfect.
 - The best way to understand this type of construction is what theologians call the “prophetic perfect.” That is, *a future act of God is spoken of as already accomplished because it is certain.*
 - This is a common understanding among Christian interpreters, and it is compatible with Jewish readings that see the light as a promised deliverance, though they would argue differently about that which is prophesied.
 - In Isaiah’s day, it can be a prophetic note of hope, in harmony with chapters 7-8.
 - In a Christian view, considering Matthew 4:14-16, it is a longer-term prophecy of the Messiah’s residence and work in Capernaum.
 - Verse 3 also contains a difficult phrase: “Thou hast multiplied the nation, *and* not increased the joy...”
 - At the heart of it, the KJV reading makes sense. The nation has grown larger in population (and even in quantity, if considering the north/south division), but the joy has gone away since the days of David and Solomon.
 - The challenge is that the phrase “*and* not increased the joy” does not seem to go with the flow of verses 2-3.
 - Because it just doesn’t seem to flow well, many translations have followed the alternate reading to make something like the ESV, which says, “You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy.”
 - The problem lies in whether the Hebrew should be read as *lo* (“not”) or *lo/low* (“to it” or “to him”). The KJV follows the written form, “not increased the joy”; many modern translations follow the alternate reading, “increased its joy.”
 - The alternate reading is not an interpretive paraphrase, but a decision on which words to translate. There is the written text (*ketiv*), which has *lo* with an aleph, meaning “not.” There is also a traditional marginal reading (*qere*), which reads *lo/low* with a waw, meaning “to it” or “to him.” Modern translations that say “increased its joy” are generally following that *qere* reading, not simply changing the text because the context feels difficult.
 - The *ketiv* vs. *qere* distinction can be understood as: “This is what is written, but this is how it is traditionally read.”
 - Ketiv: *lo* = “not”
 - “You have multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy.”
 - Qere: *lo/low* = “to him” or “to it”
 - “You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its/his joy.”
 - Since I favor the KJV, which took the *ketiv*, it could be understood this way when taken Messianically: *even though Messiah comes, the nation may not accept Him; therefore, “your house is left unto you desolate” (Matthew 23:38), and “the last state” of that generation becomes “worse than the first” (Matthew 12:45).*
 - The second part of the verse (“they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil”) describes the joy, whether increased or not increased, depending on whether the *ketiv* or *qere* reading is accepted. More importantly, in a Messianic application, it depends on the acceptance or rejection of the Messiah.
 - Verses 4-5 offer yet another set of interpretive options:

- Verse 4 is almost certainly a prophetic note of victory.
- Verse 5 can do one of two things:
 - It can say (as seen most easily in the KJV) that battles come with painful consequences (“with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood”), and this one will be especially bad (“with burning and fuel of fire”).
 - It can say (as seen most easily in modern versions, such as the ESV) that great victory will be displayed: “For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every

garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.”

- As always, I think the KJV sticks closer to the actual text and has less “reading into” the passage.
 - Taken in this light, it could go back to the *prophetic contingency* of verse 3, showing that the light shines (v. 2), but may be rejected (v. 3), and yet eventually the “yoke of his burden” (v. 4) will be broken, even if through “confused noise, and garments rolled in blood” (v. 5).

A child is born with government and peace (vv.6-7)

- Isaiah 9:6 is one of the most famous passages in all the Bible, especially for Christians, who take it as prophetic of Jesus Christ, though Isaiah 9:6 itself is not directly quoted in the New Testament.
 - The pronoun **us** is the Jewish nation.
 - The verse, like much of this chapter, uses Hebrew perfect forms, rendered in the KJV as “is born” and “is given,” but is prophetic, not merely current.
 - The child’s role: “the government shall be upon his shoulder.”
 - The child’s name: “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”
 - Young’s Literal translation says “He doth call his name. . .” The unresolved question is *who is “he”*?
 - Is it God? This makes sense, since God often names prophetically, but it opens an interesting problem, as we shall soon see.
 - Is it the baby’s father? Possibly, but we are not told who that is.
 - Is it impersonal? “One will call his name. . .” This is grammatically possible as an indefinite use of the singular, but it weakens the force of the naming.
 - Is it the people? By implication, it could be, but it does not strictly fit the singular active verb unless the people are understood collectively or supplied from context.
 - In light of the clear third-person singular, masculine verb (“he called”), the clearest option is that God is the one naming the child.
 - The Jewish English translation says, “the

wondrous adviser, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, called his name. . .”

- This view retains the third-person masculine singular and then further defines “he” as “the mighty God” etc. Grammatically, that is possible because the verb is singular and can take a singular divine subject.
- This is possible grammatically, so it weakens our argument to say the Jewish reading is impossible.
- However, we can also keep the “He” as God, implicitly, without removing God calling this child “the mighty God.” The grammar does not require the titles to be shifted away from the child; it allows God as the subject who calls the child’s name by these titles.
 - Nothing in grammar prevents the child from receiving these titles.
 - The alternate reading is possible, but it requires the title string to be divided: some titles describe the one naming, while the final title names the child.
- By verse 7, it seems almost to require a messianic fulfillment, for who else can accomplish these things “from henceforth even for ever”?
- Even Rashi, the Jewish sage, treats “from henceforth even for ever” as a key phrase that must be explained.

from now and to eternity. The eternity of Hezekiah, viz. all his days. And so we find that Hannah said concerning Samuel (I Sam. 1:22): “and abide there forever.” And, in order to refute those who disagree [i.e., the Christians, who

claim that this (Prince of Peace) is their deity], we can refute them [by asking], What is the meaning of: “from now” ? Is it not so that the “deity” did not come until after five hundred years and more?¹

- If Rashi is correct that “from now” excludes any future fulfillment, then many prophetic promises would have to be restricted to the prophet’s own generation, which would eliminate numerous recognized messianic prophecies.
- The standard Jewish interpretation of verses 6-7 is that these words are fulfilled in Hezekiah, son of Ahaz.
- The real issue, in my estimation, is whether Isaiah 9:6–7 describes only Hezekiah or whether Hezekiah serves as an initial historical fulfillment that points beyond himself to a greater Davidic king.
- I think that the passage can refer to Hezekiah in the short term and the Messiah in the long term, but it has far more problems if it is *only* about Hezekiah.

¹Rashi on Isaiah 9, Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/15940/jewish/Chapter-9.htm/showrashi>true. Accessed May 28, 2026.