

1. “A GREAT LIGHT” and “MIGHTY GOD”

Isaiah 9:1-7

Isa 9:1 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 Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest

Isa 9:6 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 Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

1. Galilee in the Spotlight

The opening verses of Isaiah 9 are prophetic words directed at the geographical area of Galilee of the Gentiles. There is an obvious New Testament feel about that expression, “Galilee of the Gentiles”, and though the area is also described by Isaiah as “*the land of Naphtali and the land of Zebulun*” (because that is where those two tribes settled when the land was first taken by Joshua) the title “Galilee of the Gentiles” is the title that stands out. No one else but Isaiah ever called this area by that title. It is a uniquely appropriate description for a unique prophecy.

The gist of the prophecy was that Galilee of the Gentiles was to “*see a great light*” (9:2), and to be a “*place that God would honour*” (9:1). As the light shone there would be a tremendous release of joy in that land, joy that could only be compared to the joy of harvest and the joy of victory over enemies (9:3). It would be like the day Israel was delivered from the oppression of Midian (9:4), when war became a thing of the past (9:5). Joy would be the key outcome of the “great light” that was to shine.

This prophecy of exuberant joy for these northern parts of Israel stands in sharp contrast to its context in Isaiah, for the other prophecies which surround chapter 9: 1-7 are prophecies of severe judgement. Isaiah’s foremost theme in those surrounding prophecies was of the imminent disaster that was to come to the Kingdom of Israel, of which the Galilean lands formed a part. In fact Galilee was destined to be the first area of the Promised Land that would experience the deportation of its people and exile. Yet in the midst of this flow of prophecies of judgement, Isaiah burst out with this incredibly striking prophecy of the glory that would be seen in Galilee. The land that was to know the “*gloom and distress*” of judgement, and would be characterized as the “*land of the shadow of death*”, was destined one day to be honoured and filled with light.

It was a totally unexpected prophecy, relating to a totally unexpected region and speaking of a totally unexpected blessing. It was also a prophecy of great hope.

2. Jesus and Galilee

In Isaiah’s prophecy this great deliverance and this great light for Galilee were intimately connected with the birth of a child. This is made clear in verse 6 which begins with the words, “***For unto us a child is born, a son is given***”. The light and the joy were to be the result of the emergence of an extraordinary person. It is when we put this prophecy alongside the astonishing ministry that Jesus actually exercised in Galilee some six hundred years later, and the enormous light he brought to the area, that we begin to appreciate something of the meaning and accuracy of this prophetic word. For the fact is that Galilee was the epicentre of the earthly ministry of Jesus; **it was overwhelmingly in Galilee that his glory was displayed, and his light shone**. No man could have dreamed up such a ministry in such a place just to “prove” a prophecy! No man could have dreamed up such an unlikely prophecy about Galilee in the vague hope that it might happen! The fact is that God spoke through his prophet and what he said, though very unlikely indeed to happen, humanly speaking, actually came to pass.

“No man could have dreamed up such an unlikely prophecy about Galilee”

Jesus grew up in Galilee, at Nazareth, and was known as a Galilean. His ministry proper, after a short period in the Jordan valley alongside John the Baptist, began in “Galilee of the Gentiles”, with Capernaum on the shores of Lake Galilee as his base. This ministry to Galilee went on for some two to three years, and it was punctuated only by periodic visits to Jerusalem for certain feasts, and by very rare forays into a few places such as Samaria and Phoenicia. It was a thorough, intensive, itinerant ministry and covered all the villages of the Galilean area. It grew in impact as the twelve apostles were also sent out to itinerate, followed later by seventy other disciples. There was clearly an impulsion on Jesus to cover the whole area, for we know that on one occasion he refused to re-enter Capernaum saying, “***I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns for this is why I was sent***” (Lk. 4:43). This indicates that Jesus himself had thoroughly digested the implications of Isaiah 9 as far as Galilee was concerned, and so gave himself totally to fulfilling what he recognized to be the prophetic purpose of God in that land. He knew he was the “child to be born”, and he knew that he was the light promised to Galilee. It would have made very great sense to him that he had been brought up in Galilee, knew the people intimately, and was well able to speak their language. He would have been very aware that everything was providentially prepared for his destined ministry.

3. The Great Light

The extent and depth of his work of preaching and healing was totally without precedent. To describe Jesus as “*a great light*” was no exaggeration. The Old Testament prophets had healed individuals, but there had been nothing remotely on the scale of Jesus’ ministry. The dead were raised, the sick were healed from every kind of disease and deformity and, very significantly, a great many

were delivered from demons. To add to it all, the poor were taught of the kingdom of God and its mysteries. A report in Luke's gospel (Lk 6:17-19) gives the flavour of those times: "A large crowd of his disciples were there, and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. (Lk. 6:17-19). When Luke here reminds us that people even came up from Jerusalem and from neighbouring cities like Tyre and Sidon we become aware that the "great light" in Galilee was one that could also be seen well beyond its own borders. It was something that had never been witnessed before in the history of Israel, not even in Jerusalem, let alone in such a despised area as Galilee.

It is easy to see how Galilee became a place of immense joy, as Isaiah 9:3 so strongly stresses. We have only to think of Jairus seeing his daughter given back to him alive, the widow of Nain seeing her only son likewise given back to her, the centurion rejoicing over his servant, the woman healed from her issues of blood after years of suffering and ostracism, and even Zacchaeus freed from a bondage of greed and corruption; all of these people would have known one thing in common, a huge release of joy in their lives. Yet these are but a few examples of what must have been happening to literally thousands who were released and delivered by the power of Jesus. It was a time that was indeed like the joy of harvest.

Why did God choose to shine the light on Galilee? One reason has to be simply that it was a prophetic statement of what was to come in the world-wide "Gentile" missions that followed his resurrection and ascension. Jew and Gentile mixed in close proximity in Galilee, and he could not but touch the Gentile world in Galilee, and so provide a foretaste of what was to come. It is true that Jesus declared that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel", but, even in the very act of making that statement, he was happy to respond to the faith of a Syro-Phoenician woman and heal her daughter (Matt 15:21ff).

A further reason for the choice of Galilee may well be that it was a region that symbolized the despised and the rejected, the needy and the blind, the very people for whom the child was born.

4. "Mighty God and Everlasting Father"

"an astonishingly direct statement of his essential divinity"

The child to be born was, then, to impact Galilee, but Isaiah has more to say about the child than what he would do. He speaks prophetically and directly about the nature and person of this child. In fact he makes an astonishingly comprehensive statement of the child's essential divinity.

Before examining this, however, we should not lose sight of the fact that the prophecy first speaks of this immense figure as having a human birth. This is a person who has true human origins and so is born like all humanity. He is no ethereal manifestation of the Godhead, no phantom. He is a real human person, not some being who just appears suddenly on earth as a God-human person and then disappears.

In the same verse, however, that his birth is foretold, this child is also called "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father" (v.6). The exact expression "Mighty God" is used by Isaiah again in 10:21, and there it refers plainly to the God of Israel, having the full meaning of divinity. There is no reason to think that it is used in any lesser sense in 9:6. The actual Hebrew word used here for God is "El", and, as one commentator asserts, "it is significant that the word for "God" in this expression is not "Elohim", which may be used in a lower sense for those who are representatives of God (e.g. Ex. 7:1). "El", on the other hand, is never used by Isaiah, or any other Old Testament writer, in any lower sense than that of absolute Deity".

It is sometimes suggested that we have here in this term "Mighty God" a rather exaggerated description of kingship appropriate for an earthly coronation, and reminiscent of some pagan rites. However, though debased at this time, the Israelite tradition was unlikely to have confused their king with God himself, and ascribed the name of God to their king. In any case we are looking less at Israelite tradition and much more at a prophet speaking in the name of God. Isaiah would have been the last person to have been guilty of such an exaggerated, pagan confusion. The expression "*Mighty God*" remains, therefore, breathtakingly direct in its implications of the child's divinity.

The expression "*Everlasting Father*" lends further support to this prophetic revelation of the divine nature of the child. The word "Father" is not current in the Old Testament as a title of the kings. Neither is the word "everlasting". Both descriptions lend themselves much more easily to descriptions of God himself, and, certainly in the light of the use of the expression "*Mighty God*", fit much more comfortably with a continuing description of the divinity of the child to be born.

"Kingship is fundamental to this Messianic figure"

5. Jesus, Prince of Peace.

The rest of the language in Isaiah 9 that is used to describe the new child relates to the fact that he will be born to kingship and to government. Thus the first expression Isaiah uses in describing the child's role is that "*the government will be on his shoulders*" (9:6). In other words he will rule. This government will keep increasing (9:7). He will rule as king, and he will reign on David's throne (come from David's line, 9:7). Kingship is fundamental to this messianic figure, a kingship which has links both to the line of David and to the one who truly is King, God himself. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that when Jesus came to Galilee he came with a proclamation essentially about a kingdom "*The Kingdom of God is at hand!*". Neither is it surprising that he declared himself king (e.g. on Palm Sunday). The coming of the kingdom, the nature of the kingdom and his own role as king were his great themes in precisely the way that they were foreshadowed in this great messianic passage of Isaiah 9.

Isaiah 9 certainly foreshadowed the nature of the kingdom: it was to be a kingdom of peace – the child was to be the "*Prince of Peace*" (9:6). In his kingdom there would be no hatred, no war, no aggression, no pain, no hurt, no anger, no bitterness, no grief, no mourning, only peace. It was a tremendous prophetic vision. This was kingship for the true benefit of those ruled. In the exercise of this kingship, the king would be a "*Wonderful Counsellor*" (9:6), "wonderful" implying that which is beyond the purely human. In other words this king would have the wisdom of God, and that wisdom involved "*justice and righteousness*" (9:7).

On any reckoning his prophetic Messianic word in Isaiah 9 is quite astounding in the accuracy of its fulfillment in Jesus. Not only does it describe the nature of his ministry and where it would take place, but in every detail prophesied precisely the claims that Jesus was to make about himself as Lord and King.