

Wonderful Counselor **Isaiah 9:1-7**

With Christmas season upon us, we will soon be celebrating the birth of our Savior, and I want to take a few weeks to ponder and appreciate the amazing blessings we've received in Christ. The way I'd like to do this is by looking at a familiar prophecy in Isaiah 9:6 – a prophecy that originally gave hope and light to a people who were in a very desperate situation, far from home, punished by God for their wickedness, and probably felt like there was no future for them. But this prophecy told them God was not done with them. He would deliver them and he would do it through a king who would rule over them with justice and righteousness, a wonderful king who would bring light, joy, and freedom.

This prophecy will help us rejoice in Christ because he's the one who fulfilled it, and he didn't just fulfill it for the people back then, he fulfills it for us today – for everyone who puts their hope and trust in him. So this morning I want to explain the background behind the prophecy so we can see why it would have been so significant to the people reading it and then I want to look at one of the first of four characteristics it revealed about who Christ would be, for them and for us.

Isaiah was a Jewish prophet who lived in Judah about 700 years before Christ was born. He lived during a time of major upheaval in that part of the world because of the brutal and bloodthirsty Assyrian Empire to the north. The Assyrians were the dominant superpower at the time and they were expanding their territories by conquering smaller kingdoms and forcing them to serve and pay tribute.

Israel at that time was divided into two kingdoms. (Picture) The northern ten tribes had separated after the reign of King Solomon and formed their own kingdom, which was still called Israel. And the southern two tribes that remained became known as Judah. Both kingdoms did evil in the sight of the Lord. They violated their covenant with him, turned to the idols of the kingdoms around them and adopted all kinds of detestable practices, including idolatry, rampant sexual immorality, and even sacrificing their own children to idols.

God warned them what would happen if they broke the covenant and sent many prophets to warn them over and over again and call them to repent. He gave them multiple chances over hundreds of years to turn back to him, but they

rejected him and continued to walk in their evil ways. So God raised up the Assyrian war machine to come and carry out judgment against them.

It was during this time that Isaiah was a prophet. Many of his prophecies warned of the coming invasion and called the people to repent, but they wouldn't listen. So the Assyrian army came. (Picture) It invaded the northern kingdom first and conquered Israel in 722B.C. Many were slaughtered and those who survived were all removed from the land and forced to relocate to the north in Assyria while other conquered people groups were brought in to resettle their lands.

Judah was next on Assyria's hit list, but at that time, God showed mercy. He raised up an Israelite king named Hezekiah who did what was right in the eyes of God. He actually listened to the prophets, including Isaiah. When Assyria surrounded Jerusalem to destroy it, he humbled himself before God and prayed. And an angel of the Lord went out at night and struck down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and Judah was rescued. Assyria never came back again.

But future kings of Judah did not follow the ways of Hezekiah and turned away from the Lord. They committed the same evil as before and wouldn't listen to the warnings to repent. So, after about 135 years, God raised up a new military super-power, the Babylonians, to come and bring judgment on Judah. Judah was defeated and forced to pay tribute to the king of Babylon, which they did for a time, but then they rebelled, which brought back the Babylonian army for the final campaign. After 18 months of resistance, Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. Thousands were mercilessly slaughtered, all the buildings were burned, and the army broke down the walls of the temple and city until there was nothing left. Many of the survivors were taken into exile, forced to march all the way back to Babylon which became their new home.

They were in a desperate situation, terribly desperate. But it was in that situation that they began to pay attention to the words of a long-dead prophet named Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecies were full of all the warnings of judgment which the people hadn't listened to, but they also contained promises of future deliverance and hope – Israel would have a future beyond the darkness of the exile. So the people who were in that situation began to have hope again, and this prophecy that we're going to look at was one of the reasons why.

Read Isaiah 9:1-7.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali (regions of northern Israel), but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. ³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. ⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. (How?...)

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

There would be hope and deliverance for the people of Israel, and that hope would come through a future king. A king who would reign forever with justice and righteousness. This is when the people of Israel began to look for the one they called "Messiah." This is a prophecy about their Messiah and you can see in verse 6 a unique description of who he would be. Isaiah gives him 4 names, 4 royal titles to describe who he would be and what he would be like. Today we're going to look at the significance of the first name, Wonderful Counselor, and we'll focus on each of the other names in the coming 3 weeks.

When we think of a Wonderful Counselor, we might think of someone who gives great advice, but for the people of Israel at that time, Counselor meant King. A king's role was to give counsel to his people, and that counsel wasn't just good advice, dealing with individual situations, a king's counsel included all of his plans, purposes, and policies for leading his kingdom. It summarized the direction he would lead them. The people's lives, well-being, and future depended on the counsel of the King. He was the one they put their hope and trust in to lead the nation to peace and prosperity.

The promise in Isaiah is that this new king would be Wonderful Counselor – Wonderful doesn't just mean great, it means unusual, extraordinary, and astonishing. The NIV Study Bible says: "*As Wonderful Counselor, the coming Son of David will carry out a royal program that will cause all the world to marvel.*" For the people in exile in Babylon, this would have been a huge relief because the kings that they had previously were anything but wonderful.

Those who were alive at the beginning of the exile would have remembered the leadership of their kings, and it's a sad story. You can read about it in 2 Kings 23-25. Their last four kings were all wicked men who made foolish decisions that led to unimaginable pain and suffering. Jehoahaz did evil in the sight of the Lord and was quickly defeated and removed when Pharaoh invaded from Egypt (2 Kings 23:31-33). Jehoiakim was set in his place by Pharaoh to be a vassal king, but also did evil before the Lord. He paid tribute to Egypt for 8 years and then Babylon for the next 3, but instead of using his own wealth or that of the nobility, he burdened the people of Judah by taxing them. He eventually rebelled against king Nebuchadnezzar when Babylon was in power, who then sent armies to besiege Jerusalem to bring them into submission (2 Kings 23:34-24:5).

Before Jerusalem was overrun, Jehoiakim died, and his son, Jehoiachin took his place. He again did evil as his father had done, and after only 3 months he gave himself up to Nebuchadnezzar, and the city fell. Thousands of Jews were killed, thousands were taken into exile and the wealth of city was plundered (2 Kings 24:6-16). Nebuchadnezzar set up Zedekiah to serve as his vassal, which he did for 9 years, but then he rebelled, which incited Nebuchadnezzar to send his armies to besiege Jerusalem again until it fell 18 months later. Zedekiah fled and was captured, and then watched as all his sons were slaughtered before his eyes. He was then blinded and led in chains to Babylon. Tens of thousands of Jews died from famine and war, the buildings of Jerusalem were all burned, the temple and city walls were knocked down, and thousands more were taken into exile (2 Kings 24:17-25:26).

These were the kings the survivors in exile remembered. After their reigns, Judah was a wasteland, Jerusalem was a heap of charred timbers and ruins, the vast majority of people died a brutal death, thousands were taken into captivity, and the only people left were living in destitute poverty. They trusted their kings, they

put their hope in them, and their kings utterly failed them. And that's what they remembered.

But the king in Isaiah's prophecy would be different. He would be Wonderful Counselor. Not a king who followed the pattern of these other wicked men, but a king who would rule with justice and righteousness. Under the leadership of this new king, the prophecy says there would be light for those in gloom, joy for those in anguish, and peace for those oppressed.

That's the king they began to look for while they were still in exile and when they returned to Jerusalem 70 years later. They continued to look through many decades of turmoil as they were caught in the middle of foreign armies fighting back and forth for control of their region. They were looking for that king during 150 years of independence under their own Hasmonean Dynasty. And they continued to look when Rome took over their land and set up Herod as their king. For 500 years they waited and looked and wondered, and at the end of Herod's reign the promised king finally came.

A child was born, a son was given – Jesus of Nazareth. He was a king unlike any other king with a kingdom that was different than anyone was expecting. His ways were so unusual, astonishing, and extraordinary, that most of his people didn't recognize him when he came. Even after the failures of all their former kings, they were still looking for the same kind of king they had before – one who would bring earthly peace and freedom, political power, and economic prosperity.

What they didn't realize was that their biggest problem wasn't the physical oppression of a foreign empire – it never was. Their biggest problem had always been their sin. Their sin against God was the reason they were defeated and lost in darkness, oppression, and anguish for all these years. And that's the problem that the Messiah came to overcome, once and for all. He came to conquer their real enemy and establish a spiritual kingdom, setting his people free from the devastating effects of their sin and transferring them into his kingdom of light.

His ways were very different. He healed diseases, cast out demons, and taught people to walk in obedience to God. He brought light, joy, peace, and freedom. He wasn't leading a rebellion against Herod or Rome because they weren't the real problem – the real problem was sin and he did everything to conquer that.

After revealing himself to the people of Israel and raising up a group of disciples to carry on his mission, he willingly suffered and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. He broke the power of sin and condemnation and then rose again in victory. And for everyone who puts their hope and trust in him, he gives forgiveness and everlasting life.

This is how Jesus is Wonderful Counselor – for the people back then, and all of us today who put our trust in him. He is a King we can trust, a Ruler we can put all our hope in. He left his home in heaven to become like us - to show us how to live and sympathize with our weakness. He suffered and died in our place so that our sins could be forgiven and we could have peace with God. By faith in him, he transfers us into his kingdom and adopts us into his family. He gives us a new heart and new spirit to walk in his ways. He goes with us, wherever we go, and has promised to never leave us or forsake us. And one day he's coming back again to take us to our eternal home that he's been preparing for us.

This is our Wonderful Counselor who we've come to worship this morning. And as we turn our hearts to him in Communion, let us ponder these things and offer ourselves completely to him.