

THE GLORIOUS REIGN OF THE SON

Dr. George O. Wood

Isaiah 9:1-7 “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. 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. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy. They rejoice before you as people rejoice at harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian’s defeat you have shattered the oak that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior’s boot used in battle, and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. 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. Of the increase 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.”

I’ve called this message today “The Glorious Reign of Jesus.” Jesus has a lot of different meanings to a lot of different people. For many people living in our society Christmas is a time of music in the air, wonderfully decorated streets and homes, Christmas trees and shopping.

And speaking of all of that it’s been difficult for me this year to get in the “Christmas spirit” because I haven’t done any shopping yet. I am way behind. Not one single gift yet. But that’s my normal pace so I’m really on schedule. I’ve found that most of the people in our family if not every person appreciates a gift that has the color of green in it and it has solved a great deal of my shopping dilemmas.

For others who are religious, Christmas carries with it the wonderful memory of the stories of the manger and the shepherds and the wise men and the angels. And the wicked King Herod. Yet sometimes even people who have the religious tapestry to Christmas have not penetrated its inner meaning or reality.

So I have selected this passage of scripture today which puts for us rather clearly the true meaning of Christmas. It is a word written for us by the prophet Isaiah 800 years before the event of Christmas. It sets out the program of the administration of Jesus the king. It talks about his glorious reign. And it talks about his reign in four different aspects. First the timing of his glorious reign. Then the effect his reign will have. Then the description of that reign. Then the endurance or length of that reign. I want to look at each of these with you today as we examine these great seven verses out of Isaiah 9.

The reign of Jesus is glorious in its timing. Verses 1 and 2, especially the first line in verse 1. “There will be no more gloom for those who are in distress.” Were I to ask how many feel gloomy at this Christmas time I’m sure I would get a reasonable show of hands. As one of the things that has surprised me as a pastor that I really didn’t know until I began having more people in my family than my own family was that how many times at Christmas families have difficult times because there has been a loss or a severance of relationship or a difficulty in the home. Financial hardship. The family I grew up in and my family have always been kind of a

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close unit. We haven't experienced those kinds of things until my own parents – my mom first and then my father passed away. Then we began to discover that Christmas had a different complexion than when everything was idyllic and as little kids we with great suspense waited for Christmas morning to open the presents underneath the tree. If we had a tree.

Christmas as its first instance was wonderful in its timing. It came to people who desperately needed Christmas. The people who are desperately needing it are spoken of in verses 1 and 2 and the people living in the lands or the tribal territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. There's a little bit of history and a little bit of geography we need to keep in mind to understand what Isaiah is actually promising. When we understand what he meant in the first instance we can then transfer it to our own lives.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the northern tribes of Israel. They are located in present day and in Jesus' day and in Isaiah's day, Galilee. That idea has not changed geographically over the centuries – where Galilee is. Jesus grew up in Nazareth. The city of Nazareth was in the tribal territory of Zebulun. And the city of Capernaum where Jesus made his adult home was in the tribal territory of Naphtali. It was there he began his ministry.

Why is this significant? Because when Isaiah prophecies there is a threatened invasion that is going to be successful. It is the invasion of northern Israel by a rival named Assyria. When they come into Israel and break down its defenses the first area to fall into captivity, centuries long captivity, is these lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. Isaiah says when the Messiah is born, when the true ruler comes, then by God's poetic and divine justice it will be an evening of the score. The first people to fall into darkness, the first people to know the yoke of captivity will also become the first people to see the light and the first people to breathe the new air of freedom. So Matthew in recording the ministry of our Lord says that when he began his ministry in Galilee he fulfilled these words which were spoken of by Isaiah that people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.

For some Christians, Christmas is a difficult time. With death and separation of a loved one or a family disruption. But what the Lord is promising to Zebulun and Naphtali he is also promising in an ultimate sense to all who follow him that there will be a day when he evens the score. And then he more that makes up for any loss that we have experienced. That we must remember that Christmas is God saying to us, you have a future. You have a hope. He is saying to us that captivity and desolation and anguish and gloom are never God's last words on our life. That he intends whether in the next 24 hours or in the next year or whether it takes eternity to bring it to pass, he intends to bring those who live in desolation and in captivity into freedom and into light. Therefore the ultimate prospect for God's people is always upward. It's always forward. It is always good. The promises that God gives us in Jesus Christ are always yes and amen. As the apostle Paul tells us.

God is restoring to us what we lost. What we lost in neglect or even what we lost through sin. Through our own personal choices we became distanced from God. Through our own personal choices we became ignorant of God. And through our own personal choices to sin we became unlike God. Jesus comes into life to give us the chance to no longer be distanced from God. To no longer be ignorant of God. To no longer be unlike God in our character and life. He has come to deliver us, the hostages to the evil one. The reign of Jesus is glorious in its timing.

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If you're here today on this Sunday before Christmas and you do not know Jesus personally in your life let me say that the timing will never be better for you to give your life to the Lord that Christmas 1987. If you're here as a Christian and you're struggling with a lot of problems and needs in your life let me also remind you that those problems and needs that you have in your life now are not the final summary of your life. God will bring you through this time. And God will make things to shine upon you and he will light up your way. He will not abandon you nor leave you. He understands and knows where you are in this present moment of gloom and distress. And Christmas is his promise to make all things right for you.

The reign of Jesus is not only glorious in its timing it is glorious in the effect that it has. Verses 3-5. Isaiah notes principally two effects. One that it reverses our destiny and secondly, that this reign of Jesus will bring joy in our lives.

First, it reverses our destiny. This is wrapped upon the phrase "You have enlarged the nation." The reason why that phrase "enlarged the nation" is there is because when Israel went into captivity the borders were shrunk and they were diminished as a people. Captivity always does that to us. When we fall into sin or when we walk in disobedience to God our personality and potential as a person in God's image begins to shrink and decrease. We cannot be what God has for us to be.

But when Jesus comes he produces a different effect upon us. He enlarges our life. Just like the nation of Israel is promised that it would be enlarged, so Jesus enlarges our life. Whereas before him all that we could see was gloom and despair and cut back and hopelessness, now in him we see a prospect for change and for hope. So much of contemporary society in which we live is hopeless. There is no rhyme or meaning or purpose in life.

I think that perhaps one of the eloquent expressions of meaninglessness that I have come across is in the modern writer Kofka's work. He describes in Europe after World War II a ruined tenement house, bombed out in which there was no one living in it. It had been a high rise. One day a guy is poking through the ruins and has managed to climb up to the tenth floor. He finds a lone resident living on the tenth floor in the apartment that he has there. Only the resident is in a most unusual place within the apartment. He is in the bathroom and he is sitting in the bathroom with a fishing pole in his hand. With the fishing pole extended out over the bathtub and the line from the end of the fishing pole going down into the bathtub. The observer in Kofka's story looks at him and says very profoundly, "You're not going to catch any fish in here." A wise and true remark. To which the man responded by shrugging his shoulders "I know it," and kept on doing what he was doing. That was Kofka's way of saying that life is meaningless and senseless. Just as it was stupid for a man to be fishing in his bathtub in a bombed out tenement house on the tenth floor, so it's stupid to go to work in the morning or to school or whatever. That life is really a mishmash of confusing things which in the ultimate sense doesn't make sense.

Bertrand Russell, the atheist, put it this way that you and I are an accidental collocate of atoms and those atoms began getting together milleniums ago and finally we got here. It's all an accident.

Against this scripture comes and says that in Christ Jesus we discover where we came from. We discover why we're here. We discover where we're going. We get meaning and purpose and intentionality in life. He enlarges our nation. He enlarges our perspective, our life, our soul, our personality.

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“What a wonderful change, says the songwriter, in my life has been wrought since Jesus came into my heart. I have light in my soul for which long I had sought, since Jesus came into my heart.” He has enlarged us. He has come into our life.

Not only has he enlarged us as an effect of his coming but he has brought us rejoicing. The rejoicing by Isaiah in verses 4 and 5 is spoken of in two metaphors. One the rejoicing of a harvest that is gathered and brought home. Then the rejoicing of a warfare that has been ended by a victory. Many of us in this room have never participated in the joy of either of those. Most of us are too young to remember the last time America won a war – World War II. That was a just cause. Those of you who are older remember those great days in mid 1945 when there was dancing in the streets and the war was over and victory was proclaimed.

Isaiah likens the kind of joy that Jesus brings to us to that kind of joy represented by a successful war.

He also represents in terms of a harvest that is brought home. And most of us are not farmers. So maybe we don't know what it is on a personal level to go out and invest all of our assets, the seed in the soil and trust the weather is going to cooperate and the economic forces of the marketplace are going to cooperate. When the crop is grow it will be of sufficient quantity because of good weather and good soil and also be of sufficient price because of a good market that we make a living off of what we have done. It is a wonderful thing when you've raised the crop and you've sold it and you look at the bottom line and you're got profit for the year.

Isaiah says think of that when thinking of the glorious reign of Jesus, the effect that it has. It brings rejoicing.

I had a reverse kind of analogy to the harvest. Some of you perhaps invest in the stock market. I've had a personal rule that I broke this last year. That is that all the years I've been pastor I've never attempted to make any outside investments because I felt that as a minister I needed to concentrate on being a prophet rather than making a profit. I realize that my own view is not necessary for anyone else to follow but our house was our asset and we are happy to have that as a growing asset in Orange County and then to spend every dime that came in... or give it away. Just like all of you.

But it was so wonderful to see what the stock market was doing this year I thought I'm foolish. I'm getting older and I'm not taking any risks in life financially. I need to start doing something about that. So I went out and borrowed some money and invested it in a particular stock that I knew was sure. If anything was sure this was sure. I was only going to stay in it a week or two and make enough to have a nice little bonus. I didn't even tell Jewel I was doing this, which made it all the worse! It was interesting to see that that particular investment dropped in two weeks, 25% of its value. The only way I'm able to stay healthy is I can laugh at things like that. Jewel didn't think it was quite as funny as I did but she got used to it!

It's interested how making investments changes your habits. I always used to read the front page first or the sports page. Now I go straight to the stocks. It's been moving back up. As soon as it gets back to where it needs to be I am getting out of that. I'm going to go back to my old rule.

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But it gave me a new appreciation for what it was like. I know what I would have felt like if it had gone 25% up. Wow! That was the smartest deal I've ever made.

Rejoicing. It's wonderful to make a buck. That's what you're trying to do out there in the market place and the work place. At least get something laid away or have a little extra fun or give a little extra to the Lord's work. Whatever you're doing it for it's nice to be able to see at the end of the year that you've actually made more than you've spent and you've made some wise decisions.

Isaiah understands that and approves that. It's the farmer going out and doing well with his assets. But he says if you want to really know what joy is, then take it a step beyond. Look at the biggest profit you've ever made in farming and then let them serve as some kind of a monitor for the joy that should be present in your mind because this child is coming. This one who is going to have the government upon his shoulders.

I've put it in these terms: sing "Joy to the World the Lord is come" as it's meant to be sung at Christmas – with vibrancy and meaning. Christ has truly turned our darkness into light. He has turned despair into hope. He has come against our greatest enemies – death, the devil and sin and he has taken them all on and he has won in his coming, in his life, in his death and in his resurrection. All of those things as continuity spell out victory for us. The effect that it's produced upon us as Christians is to turn us into people of joy and hope. I submit to you that in the last analysis there is no joy deeper than the joy of knowing you have fellowship with God, knowing that your heart's right with God, and knowing that your life is eternally kept and safe in God.

He has brought us joy. The whole aspect of his glorious reign and its timing. There's the aspect of his glorious reign and the effect that it produces upon us that he brings us joy and enlarges us. And even as we get older and even have more aches and pains and illnesses that doesn't mean we're diminishing. It just means as Paul says that someday we're getting ready to strike the tent. To step into a whole new domain of existence that God has for us.

The third thing about the reign of Jesus that Isaiah speaks of is that it is glorious in its description.

"Unto us a Son is born. Unto us a child is given. The government will be upon his shoulders." The whole progress on the human race is dependent not upon educational and scientific progress so that we're grateful for all advances in those areas. But the whole human race depends on the birth of a child. And what this child does determines our own personal welfare not only here but in days to come and in the future and in eternity.

The government will be upon his shoulders. Anyone who is in a place of leadership knows that there are times that a lot of responsibility weren't on your shoulders. Moses felt that way. There were times when he asked God to get the responsibility off his back.

One of the things I've appreciated about President Reagan is the fact that he always seems to have enjoyed being President and the responsibility doesn't seem to have turned him into a stooped over, "I've got the weight of the world on my shoulders," kind of a person. It's done that to other presidents in my lifetime. It's been nice to see somebody take on responsibility that seems to have enjoyed it.

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Jesus is quite willing to take on the responsibility of the whole human race. To take his shoulders the responsibility of your life and my life. The government will be upon his shoulders.

Have you placed the government of your life on his shoulders? Have you made him your wonderful counselor? Not just wonderful counselor not just in the psychological sense but it's also used in the scriptures in a governmental way to emphasize the skill of his planning. He's not a wonderful counselor when he speaks to you and you say, "Those are the most tremendous words I've ever heard," and then don't live by them. He only becomes wonderful counselor if we take what he says.

He is the mighty God. He's more therefore than a human being. More than a mortal baby in that manger of Bethlehem. He is before all time. More than mighty man. More than mighty teacher. He is mighty God.

He is everlasting Father. This little baby in Bethlehem's manger is from eternity. The Father of something is the source or the possessor. Like Alexander Graham Bell is described as the Father of the Telephone. Therefore when Jesus is called everlasting Father, he is the origin and possessor of eternity. Eternity flows out of his being.

He has been, is now, and shall always be and therefore he will never desert his responsibilities to his people.

He is the Prince of peace. It is the tendency of his rule to restore peace. It is the tendency of his rule to bring reconciliation and healing. He calls upon us to lay aside our conflict with him and with one another and walk in his peace.

Then the fourth thing that is glorious in the Lord's reign is his program for the future is also glorious.

His reign is glorious in his timing, it's glorious in its effect, it's glorious in its description and it's glorious in its program for the future.

"He will reign on David's throne and of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end." Unending administration.

Just a little over a year now and Ronald Reagan is going to step aside. January 20, 1989 he must yield his office to a successor. His eight years will come to a conclusion.

But there will be no conclusion to the Lord's reign in the year 1989. Nor will there be a conclusion in 2089, nor 3089, nor 4089 because he's not up for election. He's not elected by a democratic vote. He is installed by virtue of the authority of the sovereign God and he will reign forever and ever. Where he is enthroned he brings justice and righteousness. He comes as a child. He comes as one without the external trappings of power that we might respond to him out of love. And not simply out of a cowering submissiveness. He promises us that all who will voluntarily receive his rule now will be in his rule in the age to come.

There's a lot of people running for president these days, isn't there? There's so many it's rough to keep track of all the players. Nobody really knows who's going to win. Wouldn't it be funny

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if Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson were the two candidates? Two ministers. We could choose what set of theologies we're going to buy!

But who knows. But what if at this point you wanted to get into politics and you wanted to hold a national office. And you said, I think I know who's going to emerge from this. Not only as their party's nominee but as the president. "I'm going to go this week and offer myself to work for free on their campaign. I'm going to take a year out. I've got a lot of super executive talent and I'm going to help them with their campaign. They're going to like me so well and become so dependent upon me that by the time they're elected president they'll appoint me to a high post in their administration."

If you'd have known that about Jimmy Carter in 1976 when he was Mr. Nobody and joined him you could have been in his administration in those four years.

So let's say you choose the former governor of Arizona. He's not given much of a chance to win. But suppose you say, "I'm going to give you a whole year. I'm going to work on your campaign. I've got tremendous talent. Here's my resume. Can I sign up somewhere?" He says sure, start stuffing envelopes. You do that so well he advances you. Before too many months go by you're up in the upper echelons of the campaign working. He starts winning big, wins the primaries, wins the nomination, wins the presidency. Come a year from now you've got a cabinet post waiting for you or a major job in the administration. You say, yeah, I got it because I knew him when he was nobody. I got in on the early days.

He's not a sure winner. But Jesus of Bethlehem in Nazareth sure is. You can get in on his administration by becoming his follower and disciple. And he is going to reign forever and ever. Which is going to give you something to do for a long, long time. And someone to love for a long, long time.

The glorious reign of the Son. I close with two stories of Bethlehem, contemporary stories.

Several years ago I was having dinner with one of the leading merchants of Bethlehem who's an Arab Christian. Bethlehem is about half-Arab Christian Greek orthodox and half Muslim. The strongest Christian community in the whole Arab rule is in Israel on the West Bank and in Galilee. Nicky and his wife who are nominal Christians but I did not know they had personally received the Lord in their life. They grew up in the church. They had taken my wife and I out for dinner at a French restaurant in Jerusalem. Culture class. An Arab couple to a French restaurant in Jerusalem. It was an interesting kind of thing.

Nicky is a six foot three, 230 pounds and his personality is an expansive and magnanimous as his girth. He's a wonderful guy. And a very beautiful and knowledgeable wife. As we were talking about a lot of things during the course of the meal his wife turned to Jewel and me and said, "So many of you American Christians come here and talk about being born again. What exactly does that mean?" I thought wow! Any preacher would give anything to be asked a question like that. What an open door to witness. Just as I was about to say something Nicky not noticing I was ready to speak, said, "I know what that is." I thought this is going to be interesting! He said to her, "It's like this. You and I grew up in the church. But that didn't make us Christians. You can't be a Christian by just growing up in the church. That's something you have to do on your own. Your parents can't give it to you and the church can't give it to you. You have to decide for yourself to invite Jesus into your life. I've done that." He said that kind of matter of factly.

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You could have pushed me over with a feather. I had never heard a clearer statement of what it means to really be a Christian than from the merchant of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. That's a decision you make in your own inner life. You don't get it by growing up in the church. Whether the church was Pentecostal or Greek orthodox it doesn't matter. It's a personal decision you make. You can't get it from your parents. They can pass their training and their heritage on but they can't pass your personal faith on to you. It's something you must make on your own. The glorious reign of the Son is not imposed upon unwilling people. It is only for those who choose to be in it.

The other thing from Bethlehem I want to make note when we talk about the glorious reign of Jesus is the church of the nativity at Bethlehem. It's a church that's actually built over the cave which is purported to actually be where Jesus is born. It's probably a very likely site because that particular hillside is the only area within Bethlehem that has proven remains of caves. So it's most like that was the area. That church has been there since the fourth century. It's one of the oldest churches in Christendom.

To enter that church is an interesting experience. You go through an open courtyard area. Then you come to a very small door. In order to get through that door without bending over you either have to be very, very short or a child. Everybody of normal height must bend over. I happen to know the historical reason so it ruins a little bit my spiritual application. But in all fairness to you I should tell you the historical reason for that small door being there is during the middle ages non Christians used to desolate the sanctuary by riding their horses through it. That gets very distracting when you're having a service is to have people galloping in on horses. The church got fed up with the big doors and walled it off and left the little doors so the horses couldn't come through.

But to the non-knowledgeable pilgrim the other story I like better. That is their reason why this door is so small is it is unfitting that anyone coming to see where Jesus of Nazareth was born should not have to first bow before they come into the area. I like that. It says to us that as an individual person in life our basic deference in life and our worship and our adoration is given to one for whom it is appropriate that we physically bow as an act of obedience and surrender. And before whom also we bow our hearts and say, this baby of Bethlehem is the Lord. He is the mighty God, the wonderful counselor, the everlasting father, the prince of peace.

Our Lord, we come to you today. I pray on behalf of those in this congregation who perhaps have not done what Nicky the merchant of Bethlehem has done. Make a personal decision to invite you to be Lord of their life. There's never a better time, Lord, than right now. And this Christmas 1987. I pray for those who are here who have not made that personal decision in their own life. That even in this moment they would say yes to you and receive you as their Lord and savior. Then Lord I pray for others in this congregation today who have acknowledged you as Lord and savior and yet are involved in struggles in their life some of which are not their fault, and others which directly flow out of disobedience to you. You call yourself prince of peace. If there is no peace in our life, Lord, could it be that we have refused your solution to our problems and in so refusing that solution have invited strife and distress. If so, Lord, may we find our resting place in you today. And receive from you and from your own hand and word instruction and guidance that will put peace back into our life so that we may acknowledge you as the prince of our peace and our wonderful counselor. Thank you, Lord, for being more than a friend to us, more than a

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counselor to us. Thank you for being the Father of eternity and the mighty God. Man can never save us against supernatural powers. It took your might to defeat him who holds the evil of this world in his hands. It took your power to defeat death, Satan, and sin. We thank you that in you is the mighty God and that we may depend upon you to break every yoke of bondage in our life and to create a new effect in our life of enlarging our potential of service to you and bringing us joy, real joy in our life. We seek these things our Lord in your name because we know you love us and you care for us. That even as there have been occasions when our children were younger we've held them in our own arms and prayed for them when they were sleeping. We know that you're ever praying for us. Interceding for us even when we're not aware of it. In our greatest moments of need you're there. We thank you for your constant help, your love and friendship. And your willingness to be our Lord. May this Christmas find your life dwelling richly in us. And in our homes likewise you be the Lord. We ask this in your name. Amen.