

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

"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 the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel." We use that phrase a lot to convey a sense of hope. I suppose it comes from the world of trains. You are traveling through a dark tunnel. Finally, you see a light at the end of the tunnel which means you are almost through it. You have to undergo several surgeries and then you must go through months of physical therapy. But you know that when it is all done, you will be better off than you are now. So you endure it because there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

In this prophecy from Isaiah, God is speaking to those, including us, who are distressed and gloomy. But he tells us there is a light at the end of the tunnel. That light is Jesus Christ, and it shines hope into us now and forever.

I. The light is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Allow me to give you a bit of a history lesson. ***"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."***

We need to understand the condition of Zebulun and Naphtali. The dirtiest piece of carpet in your home should be the doormat, and rightly so. Every person who comes through your door wipes his feet on the doormat. Zebulun and Naphtali were the doormats of Israel. These tribes occupied the northernmost part of Israel. If someone attacked Israel, it always came from the North through Zebulun and Naphtali: Syria, the Arameans, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, all invaded through Zebulun and Naphtali. Imagine if a tornado came through town here every five or ten years. As soon as you rebuild everything, it is destroyed again. That is what it was like to live there. The centuries of war and exile and repopulation had taken its toll. The people were so mixed that it is sometimes known as Galilee of the Gentiles. By the time of Jesus, no one had any respect for this area. When Nathanael heard the Messiah was from Nazareth, he said, ***"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"*** Nazareth is located in Galilee which is where Zebulun and Naphtali once were.

So Galilee was a dark, gloomy place. But not just because of the wars. Because of all the intermixing and intermarriages and foreign invasions, the people had little or no idea who God was. Their religion was a mixed religion. It would be like having a cross in our church, but also a picture of Confucius, readings from the Koran, and we would light candles for relatives hoping they would reincarnate into a higher life form. The net result was Galilee had a few believers here or there like Nazareth where Jesus' family lived, but for the most part they were living in darkness.

That describes Galilee, a land living in darkness. People were depressed after centuries of war. They were unclear who God was or his promise of a Savior. They were living under the shadow of death, not just physical death, but spiritual death. You know, this describes the world today, doesn't it. You have secular psychologists and sociologists telling us things. They don't deal with life after death. The emphasis is to make as much money before you die and to enjoy it. You have all sorts of religious ideas floating around out there even in Christian churches. I heard the other day someone quoting the Prodigal Son as justification to forgive college debts. Fewer are basing their religion on what God says. It is like driving to Mankato. You see a turn off for Mankato, but there are other signs that promise, "Here is a faster, safer, more fun way," so you follow those signs only to end up in Iowa. Are we truly focused on Christ, or are we focused on other things?

Yet out of this dark, gloomy place the Lord made his light shine. ***"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."*** How did this light shine? Well, you heard how in our gospel reading: ***"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."*** Jesus shed light by preaching and teaching God's Word. God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. Like Zebulun and Naphtali we are the crossroads of the great battle between God and the devil. We are doormats where sin and its destructive consequences constantly wipe their feet. And if you look, many of those footsteps are our own. Yes, others hurt us, but we do our fair share of sinning. Indeed we walk in the shadow of death.

But there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and that light is Jesus Christ. Jesus had his dark tunnel. Remember in the Garden of Gethsemane where we are told that Jesus began to be full of sorrow and troubled? That is because he was about to drink the vile, bitter cup of suffering for the sins of the world! He saw what would happen if he became sin for us. He would be cut off from God. He would experience hell. No tunnel was ever as dark and gloomy as his. Yet, he traveled through that tunnel. He

drank that bitter cup. He died for your sins. And now there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and not for Jesus, but for all of us. That light shines into a grave that opens as he raises us to eternal life. We are simply following Jesus.

David was in a gloomy tunnel many times, especially after murdering Uriah. But Nathan came, led him to repentance, and said that his sin was forgiven. Peter was in that tunnel when he denied Christ three times. But Jesus was the light at the end of his tunnel when he forgave him and took him back. Job was gloomy and distressed, but he saw that light which led him to cry out, **"I know that my Redeemer lives."**

Do you see that light? Maybe you are just trying to get by. You live day by day, week by week, year by year and trying to get by with as few bumps and bruises as possible. Just get to retirement, right? Maybe you are retired and you are just trying to get through with as few medical issues and bills possible. Maybe you are a teen and you are trying to figure out how to get through school and what to do with your life. All of this is true. Don't settle for those as lights at the end of the tunnel. Jesus offers you a better light that gets you all the way through this world into heaven. Think about it. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This must have made life better for his sisters and friends. And Lazarus got his life back. Think about it. He still died again. He died twice. If all Jesus offered us was a little better life now, we are to be pitied. No. He gives us a light all the way through the tunnel and death to eternal life in heaven. Make that your priority and goal in life.

II. This light is shining on us NOW.

But this light is more than just at the end of the tunnel; it shines on us right now.

I am not a farmer, nor did I grow up on a farm. But I sense it is tough being a farmer. But have you read Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books? The chance for crop failure was worse then. She talked about prairie fires and about the grasshoppers covering the ground as far as the eye could see, devouring entire crops. At any moment the farmer could lose everything. Now you see how the farmer can't breathe a sigh of relief until the harvest is in.

That is the picture Isaiah paints for us here. When the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ shines, its blessings are now and not later. **"You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."** Yes, we are not in heaven yet. Yes, we live in a sinful world with the devil prowling around like a roaring lion. Yes, we have seen Christians wander and stray from God, going back into darkness. We feel like nervous farmers who got the seed in the ground and we are afraid something bad will happen and we will lose the crop. But this section from Isaiah promises us that we can rejoice like the farmer *after the harvest*. Or to use another picture, it describes us now as though the battle is over. It is time to plunder.

When a believer dies, God forbid if we don't direct the family to the resurrection of the dead. But we don't have to wait to die to enjoy the fruits of victory. They are ours now. Look at the week old baby. Because of Baptism, that child already is considered 100% holy and blameless and an heir of eternal life. There is no doubt if that child should die. That baby doesn't have to wait another ten or fifteen years for forgiveness to fully kick in; that baby has it now.

And now look at us. The effects of baptism are still there. Our sins are forgiven now. We don't have to wait another five or ten years. We don't have to wait for this and that to happen before we can be saved. The battle is over. The devil is defeated. Our sins are forgiven. Our joy and our comfort is NOW. Why? How? Just as Jesus did, by the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Jesus began to shine his light first in the dark corner of Galilee and eventually brought that light to us through that Word. Thank God we know and believe these most wonderful truths. INJ Amen.