

A GREAT LIGHT

ISAIAH 9:1-2

Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed, as when at first He lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward more heavily oppressed her, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.

This past Christmas I did pretty good with the gift count... *got a new **golf bag** from my boys, **photos** of my grandkids, a **fit-bit** from my wife, some **gift cards**...*

I always appreciate a gift card and a good meal.

But over the last few years I've gotten some unique gifts from my friend, Roland... He's quite a creative gift giver. One year he gave me a giant potato gun. It was fabulous - *what every pastor needs*. Me and my boys spent that Christmas shooting taters at our old mini-van.

Then the next year Roland gave me some Chinese throwing stars. Then some little daggers. Then one year some noon chucks. *Every pastor appreciates a weapon.*

But this year Roland shifted gears. I guess he ran out of lethal gifts, so he gave me a high beam flash light. *But here's the deal - it's only three inches long.* It's a high beam light that fits in your pant's pocket. It's pretty cool.

Barbie even bought Kathy one. It shoots the intense beam of a mag-light, but she can slip it in her purse.

I'm not sure Roland imagined this year's flashlight gift impacting me spiritually, but it has. Lately, whenever I contemplate the ministry of *Jesus, God's gift to us*, I think of *Roland's gift to me* - **this three inch mag light.**

In our text this AM, Isaiah refers to *"a great light"* shining from a place of *"gloom."* A *"distressed"* and *"oppressed"* place that God had only *"lightly esteemed."*

In other words, **a high beam in a short case!**

The land that Isaiah is referencing - the dark backdrop for this *"great light"* - is identified by several phrases, *"the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali"* - *"by the way of the sea"* - *"beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles."*

If you've been to Israel with us, you've been to all these places. Each of these names should ring a bell.

Of course, *“Zebulun and Naphtali”* are two of Israel’s original twelve tribes. They were given territories in the land. The *“region of Zebulun”* ran north of the Valley of Megiddo, and west toward the Mediterranean Sea.

“The land of Naphtali” extended to the far north - as far as Dan - and southward surrounding the Sea of Galilee.

The territories described as *“beyond the Jordan”* were east of the Sea of Galilee. Today, we call them the Golan Heights... In ancient times, the region of Galilee was called the *“Galilee of the Gentiles”* since it was heavily populated by pagans, and Greeks, and Gentiles.

And *“the way of the sea”* is the name of the caravan route, *the road*, that connected the previously mentioned areas. It was known by it’s Latin name, *“the Via Maris.”*

As verse 1 describes, this was an area of Israel that was constantly under a cloud of gloom. Over Israel’s long history, the nation fought frequent wars. Its various invaders would usually march down from the north.

Their troops followed the Via Maris, and the first areas to feel the brunt of the enemy’s fury and anger was the *“land beyond the Jordan”* - then the regions of *“Naphtali and Zebulun.”* In fact, Isaiah 9 is a continuation of chapter 8, which describes Assyria’s invasion into Israel.

As Isaiah puts it, northern Israel was a “*distressed*” and “*oppressed*” land. In contrast to Jerusalem in the southern part of Israel - a city that enjoyed a relative peace and prosperity - the northern Israelis “*walked in darkness*” and lived their lives “*in the shadow of death.*”

And to an extent, the same “*gloom*” hangs over this region today. When Hezbollah terrorists bunkered in the Lebanese mountains want to fire a few rockets into Israel, they strike northern towns like Kiryat Shemona and Kfar Blum and other little villages off Highway 90.

Recently, I met a CC pastor who moved to northern Israel. He brings over Christians groups from the States and helps paint bomb shelters where these Israelis are forced to spend too much of their time. His groups use bright colors. It brings some cheer into a gloomy shelter.

Jerusalem was “*the holy city*” - “*the city of peace.*”

It was “*the big city*” you might say. Aspiring Jews wanting to move up in society came south to Jerusalem.

If you lived in ancient Israel you’d say, “*The South is where the action is.*” The north was “*lightly esteemed.*”

Yet, here's the irony, Isaiah prophesies that God will shine a bright light, not from Jerusalem, as you might expect - *the ground zero of Judaism - the hub of religion*.

The golden Menorah, the light of the Temple - the symbol of the nation - shined from the city of Jerusalem. But this light will shine from *the less significant* north!

Not from the city of peace protected by walls, but from the heartland - the unprotected fields and valleys where the invaders trespassed, and stomp on, and plundered.

Isaiah predicts **a high beam, but from three inches.**

As we've been noting, embedded in the prophecies of Isaiah are portraits of Jesus. *And here's another...*

Matthew 4:12 introduces the ministry of our Lord...

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee (Galilee of the Gentiles).

And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: (And Matthew quotes 9:1-2) “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” Matthew continues, “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew quotes Isaiah to make the same point about the ministry of Jesus. God chose to shine the greatest light from a gloomy, oppressed, insignificant location.

Jesus was **the bright light that fit in a pocket.**

In fact, Matthew takes this idea a step further and pinpoints the exact city - *if you can call it a city* - which was to be the headquarters of Jesus' ministry. It was named "**Capernaum,**" which means, "**village of Nahum.**"

It was a fishing spot. Not much more than a place on the shore where the fishing boats laid out their nets to mend and dry. In contrast, to the important city, the big city, the holy city of Jerusalem, Capernaum was a nondescript Jewish town on the outskirts of the nation.

Yet what amazing sights the eyes of its citizens saw over a three-and-a-half year stretch in first century AD.

I'm sure you've heard of the Bermuda Triangle? It's an area in the Caribbean Sea, about a million square miles depending on how you define it, where strange, mysterious, inexplicable phenomena have occurred.

Airplanes disappear from the radar.

Navigational instruments go haywire.

Boats are lost and never found.

Some researchers theorize the Bermuda Triangle is a playground for the paranormal, even demonic activity... It has a reputation as *a supernatural hotspot*.

But there's another triangle of real estate that was also known for wild displays of supernatural activity.

No other location on Earth has seen more miracles per square mile than the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee - *the Galilee of the Gentiles*, no less.

The area between the two fishing villages of *Capernaum* and *Bethsaida*, and the town of *Chorazin*.

The "**Gospel Triangle**" as it's been called, is an area just 10 square miles, but between 28 to 32 AD the people living there saw a cavalcade of miraculous, stupendous events - sights not seen before or since...

Five loaves and two minnows were somehow multiplied to feed 5000 families... Blind men received their sight... Lame men walked... A girl's corpse was brought back to life... A Man walked across the surface of the lake... A violent storm was calmed by the same Man's rebuke... Demons were exorcised... Multiple diseases were healed, some by just speaking a word...

It was an unprecedented parade of miracles!

The people who witnessed these events may've had a troubled past - a hard history - but suddenly, God sent them *"a great light"* shining into their darkness.

Spiritually speaking, Jesus was painting bright colors onto the walls of their bomb shelters... As Isaiah says in verse 3, God *"increased their joy."* He brought life to folks huddled under the gloom and shadow of death.

And how great a light Jesus was!

When God created the heavens and the earth He said, *"Let there be light"* - and for the first time, light exploded into the primeval darkness. The dark was never again as dark. Light now pulsed and glowed.

And here, God sends another explosion of light. *"A great light"* was sent to folks living in spiritual darkness, who had never seen or known God. In John 8:12 Jesus said, *"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life..."*

Jesus was like a three inch high beam!

As I see it, Jesus shined a light in three directions...

On **the power of God...** on **the law of God...** and on **the heart of God...** Jesus revealed God's *might*, His *mind*, and His *motive*. *He shined a very great light!*

First, Jesus shined *"a light"* on **the power of God.**

When He calmed the sea, and the wind and waves obeyed Him, He was showing He could corral the forces of nature.... When He multiplied loaves and fish He was manipulating their molecular structure... When He walked on water He was defying physical laws... In all His miracles Jesus showed a **command over nature**.

When Jesus drove the den of demons from the man in Gadara, He was displaying His **authority over Satan**.

When He healed the leper, lowered the fever, made blind eyes see, He revealed **dominance over disease**.

When Jesus raised the dead corpse of the boy at the gate of Nain, and Jairus' daughter, and His friend, Lazarus, He was making clear His **power over death**...

When Jesus healed the sick on the Sabbath Day, and threshed the wheat and fed it to His disciples, He was showing His **superiority over tradition and religion**.

And when Jesus dared to forgive sin, He was putting Himself in the place of God. Jesus was expressing His deity, His absolute sovereignty, **His ability to judge**.

When Jesus worked His miracles it was evidence of who He was... **Add it all up...** *control over nature, authority over Satan, dominance over disease, power over death, superiority over tradition and religion, ultimately the ability to judge and forgive sin...* this proved once and for all that Jesus was God Almighty!

There were Jews at the time of Christ who no doubt questioned the power of God. If God were almighty why did His people languish under the Roman yoke?

But the light of Jesus was intended to restore to the Jewish people their confidence in God's power.

Their Father in heaven was still on the throne. Nothing was outside His jurisdiction or His reach. God didn't choose to work in the ways the Jews wanted, but no matter how dark it became, God's light still shined!

When Jesus entered the world... *the light first shined in the darkness.* And ever since that time, Jesus has been showing up at dark times. He is a very great light!

I read a story told by Gardner Taylor, a preacher from New York City. But he got his start down on the Bayou.

One night he was preaching in a little church. The sanctuary was lit by a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Gardner was preaching away, when all of a sudden the electricity went out. The room went black.

He didn't know how to handle the situation. *What should he say?* He stumbled around for a few minutes when one old deacon in the back shouted out, "Preach on Preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark."

In fact, the light was first given to a people who "*walked in darkness*" - and who dwelt in "*the shadows.*"

In regards to Jesus' miraculous birth the angel told Mary, "For with God nothing will be impossible." And this would become the theme of Jesus' entire life.

He came to shine a light on the power of God!

There is an interesting verse that quotes Jesus' opponents in John 11. After He raises Lazarus, the eye-witnesses reported the miracle to the Pharisees.

They in turn, debate the situation. One of them asks, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs?"

Notice all His miracles were called "signs." A miracle is marvelous, but it points to something else. It's a sign.

One paraphrases renders their question, "What do we do now? This Man keeps on doing things, creating God-signs." And I love that expression, "God-signs."

That was the purpose of Jesus' miracles. They proved that He was God. *Only God had such power.*

Realize, everyone Jesus healed, later died.

Those He resurrected had to die twice.

The power of God behind Jesus' miracles wasn't intended to alleviate all human suffering. He wasn't trying to put hospitals and mortuaries out of business.

No, all of Jesus' *miracles* conveyed a *message*...

When He opened the eyes of the blind, it conveyed hope to people suffering from all kinds of blindness - not just physical, but spiritual blindness as well.

Jesus can open our eyes no matter our problem.

When He cleansed the leper, He was saying to all the “unclean” - not just those defiled by leprosy - but by AIDS, shame, greed, lust - any kind of defilement and uncleanness - that He can make us all pure and whole.

And when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He wasn't promising to spare all His followers from dying.

Instead, He was proving to be “the resurrection and the life” - that He can be trusted even at death's door.

Jesus shined a light on the power of God, His might - but He also illuminated the law of God - God's mind.

In Psalm 19 David makes glowing comments about the incomparable Law of God, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward.” God’s Law was a beautiful expression of His mind and His heart.

But as usual man took what was beautiful, and defiled it - made it ugly. The first century Pharisees interpreted God’s Law in a harsh, condemning way...

And Jesus revealed that this was not God’s attitude at all! In light of Jesus, it was apparent that God thinks in *rhythms of grace* - not just *the demands of the Law*.

The Pharisees were quick to condemn the woman taken in adultery. They used the Law to solidify her sentence... And Jesus never denied the Law. He just qualified who was worthy to carry it out. As stones fell from the fingers of her self-righteous accusers it was apparent the answer to that question was Jesus alone.

Jesus was authorized to cast a stone, yet He chose to forgive. He extended mercy and grace. The Law He followed looked for opportunities to pardon, not punish.

Yes, the Law handed out sentences to Lawbreakers, but first it look for ways to convey God’s forgiveness.

Sacrifices were offered continually. Sin was covered. God’s wrath *passed over*... A river of blood flowed from the altar testifying of God’s determination to save.

It was the Law, Exodus 34, that revealed God's name, "The LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.." That's another name for *grace!*

In Luke 15 Jesus taught that God is like *the shepherd who seeks out the one lost sheep... Or the woman who turns over the house in search of the lost coin... Or the Father who sees His lost son at a distance, and races to him to welcome him home...*

These parables proved that the Law of God did nothing to stunt God's seeking and saving love - or to tighten off the valve of grace. *Jesus opened it wider...*

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told us He came to fulfill, *not destroy*, the Law. In Him we receive a *inward, spiritual righteousness* that exceeds the *external righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees.

The Pharisees were proud they'd kept the Law, "You shall not murder." They'd never done *the deed*, but *the seed* was growing in their heart. You may never pull the trigger, but unresolved anger is a deadly shot.

Jesus taught we need to deal with that anger in loving ways. Pull *the weed* before it becomes *a deed*.

The Pharisees took pride in that they'd been faithful to their wife. But Jesus says if you "*lust after a woman*" in your heart you've committed adultery already.

The Pharisees interpreted the Law in a stilted, literal, legalistic manner. Jesus understood the Law spoke not just to a man's actions, but to his or her attitudes. The Law didn't just direct our hands, it checked our hearts.

The Law served many purposes... It communicated God's love for righteousness. It instilled in us a fear of the Lord. It exposed our sin, and our need for a Savior.

The Law helped us to identify sin... We wouldn't know we were breaking the speed limit if a sign wasn't posted. And this is what the Law did. It set our limits.

This past week Kathy and I ate at Ruby Tuesday's. I love the hickory bourbon chicken. *Don't worry they cook out all the alcohol. Your pastor is not getting drunk off the chicken.* The menu actually lists the calories - *only 344 - pretty good.* It tastes great and is less filling.

In fact, I read a study recently that said Americans appreciate the labeling of the calories in a food item.

The only problem... According to the study though we appreciate the calorie labeling, it has little impact on what we choose to eat. The labeling lets us know what we're eating is bad for us, but it doesn't give us the power to resist, or a new taste for an alternate food.

This was the problem with the Law. It exposed what was wrong, but lacked the ability to effect change in us.

In Jesus, God shined a light on God's Law. The Law was about love - love for God and for one's fellow man.

But the only way to achieve such love is to receive it from Jesus. Thus, the key to the Law is to know Christ.

This is what Jesus taught us in John 6:28. The Jews came to Him, and asked Him, *"What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"* *What deed can I do to please God?* Jesus answered them, *"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."*

Come to Jesus and He'll write God's Law on your heart. His Spirit inscribes His love into our very nature.

Jesus was a light that illuminated **God's Law**, but He also cast *a very great light* on **God's heart**, His **motive**.

For some reason Jews in Jesus' day had it all wrong. They had God pegged for a vindictive, judgmental God... quick to condemn, and enjoyed punishing.

They assumed because God *loved them*, He *hated everyone else*. The Jews believed God created the Gentiles so He'd have kindling for the flames of Hell.

Just the opposite was true. God loves all people. And to prove it He shined a very great light, not just to the Jews in Jerusalem, but to *the Galilee of the Gentiles*.

What a shock to the Jews when Jesus reached out and loved sinners - Gentiles - the unsavory of society.

One of the criticisms leveled against Him should've been a trait most admired. In Luke 7:34 His enemies called Jesus, “a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”

Imagine, the Lord of glory, the Holy One, came to this Earth to be a friend to tax agents and slime balls.

In the very same passage, Luke 7, a woman comes to Jesus. The Bible calls her “a sinful woman” - she could've been a prostitute - maybe a snooty housewife.

But she found Jesus at a Pharisee's house. He was eating dinner. Somehow she scooted by the security and fell at His feet. She immediately broke open an expensive perfume and with the liquid and her tears she anointed His feet and dried them with her hair.

It was a riveting act of true repentance.

But the Pharisee didn't see it that way. He couldn't believe Jesus, a Prophet, a man of God, would allow such a sinner to touch Him, let alone anoint His feet.

Jesus tells the Pharisee a story of forgiveness. One man is forgiven 500 denarii. Another 50 denarii. Then He asks, “*Who will love more?*” The answer was easy. The man caught on, “*I guess, the one forgiven more.*”

Forgiveness was the only explanation for this woman's extravagant love. And the lack of forgiveness was the conclusion for the Pharisee's judgmental spirit.

Luke 7 ends it, "(Jesus) said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." And those who sat at the table... began to say to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"... He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." **Jesus was all about forgiveness!**

His heart - *God's heart* - was to make a way for sinners to come to God and be forgiven - not raise the walls higher and make it more difficult to jump over.

Even when He dealt with the rich, young ruler... The man who'd made an idol out of his bank accounts.

Yes, Jesus had to tell him to sell all he had - cash in his idols. And afterwards, Jesus' disciples grilled Him. They thought He was unnecessarily hard on the fellow.

They asked Jesus, "*Who then can be saved?*" And Jesus answered them in the most marvelous way, "*With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*" God still has ways of *reaching a man*, and *dealing with a man*, and *getting a man to a place of repentance and faith* that we know nothing about!

Actually, it takes a miracle for any of us to be saved!

And God had a final miracle in store - a miracle that would take care of our salvation. His Son bore the sin of the world on His innocent shoulders and paid the penalty for all our sin - past, present, even future.

And now He offers us that forgiveness *for free*.

Notice, I didn't say cheap. Your forgiveness cost God a high price. There's nothing cheap about our pardon. It cost God the blood of His only Son, *but now it's free*.

Pastor Wayne Cordeiro tells the story of his lunches with Gene. His friend picked up the tab every week.

Wayne thought it was a nice gesture. He appreciated Gene's thoughtfulness. But after the 80th or so time, he said, "*Gene, let me pay today.*" Gene snapped back, "*No, no, no. I insist. I want to pick up this tab.*"

This went on week after week. The two men arguing over who would pay, and Gene always winning out.

One week, Wayne arrived early. He told the waitress, "*Now when you deliver the bill, bring it straight to me?*"

She said, "*O, Gene said you might do this. I'm sorry, I can't. Gene gave me orders. The bill goes to him.*"

That day Wayne pleaded, “Gene, I yearn to pick up the tab... I’m starting to dream about picking up the tab... I beg you, please, let me pick up the tab...” But Gene refused. He never, ever gave in, not even once.

And my friends, our Jesus is like Gene! Rather than a God who is reluctant to forgive, God insists on picking up the tab. He’s already paid the price - and He picks up the tab not once, not twice... He does it every time you sin because He loves fellowshiping with you.

In a land of “*gloom,*” in a “*distressed and oppressed*” place, in a location that was “*lightly esteemed,*” God shined a great light - a high beam in a three inch case.

And His name is Jesus! He’s shined a light on **the power of God, the law of God,** and **the heart of God.**

A young man was talking to his friend. He confessed he was in love with a girl who didn’t even know it. He’d been too afraid of rejection to pursue the young lady.

His friend asked him, “Well, how much do you love her? Is it **just love** - is it **big love** - or is it **great love**?”

The fellow replied, “*What do you mean just love, big love, or great love?*” His pal explained, “Well, **just love** lasts two months. Whereas, **big love** lasts two years. But **great love** changes your life.” And indeed it does!

That's why if you haven't experienced a changed life it's possible you don't know Jesus and how much He really loves you. *He is a great light in our dark world.*

Bible commentator Alfred Edershiem mentions a title Jews had for the Messiah. He was, "the Enlightener."

This is what Jesus does. He enlightens us to the might, mind, and motive of God. There's no guessing when our eyes are fixed on Jesus. He's a bright light.

When Jesus is present issues become clearer - the fogginess is dispelled - deception is uncovered - truth is spotlighted - insights abound! Jesus is "a great light."

Let me close with a story I read about a man named Arthur Burns. Burns, a distinguished economist, was the chairman of the Federal Reserve and an financial counselor to presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan.

He was also Jewish, so when he started to attend a White House prayer group, the Christians who made up the group tried to be particularly respectful of Burns.

When it came time to pray - not wanting to make him uncomfortable - the group would skip over Mr. Burns.

Until one meeting, a man was leading the group who didn't know the situation. He asked Arthur Burns to lead them in prayer. To everyone's surprise he agreed.

In fact, no one present that day forgot his words.

He prayed, “Lord, I pray that you would bring Jews to know Jesus Christ. I pray that you would bring Muslims to know Jesus Christ. Finally, Lord, I pray that you would bring Christians to know Jesus Christ. Amen.”

And this is my prayer, *that you would know Jesus!*

For I think it’s possible for a person to be saved by Christ, yet never take the time to really get to know Him. Some Christians remain in the dark because they never learned of the **power, law, and heart** of Jesus.

In a place of “**gloom**” and “**distress**” - that had seen its share of suffering - in a place “**lightly esteemed**” - God sent “**a great light**” - *a mag light in a tiny case.*

I hope Jesus is your light in this new year. Through Jesus you’ll learn of the **power, law, and heart** of God.

Jesus has a **great love** for us!

May we have a **great love** for Jesus!