

# **A Christmas Lesson from the Old Testament**



Isaiah 9:1-7

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The stories of Christmas usually come from one of the Gospel accounts in the New Testament books of Luke or Matthew. However, the Bible passage for this study comes out of the Old Testament book of Isaiah, a prophecy written over 700 years before Christ. In its introduction to the book of Isaiah, a well-known commentary states, "Of all the books in the Old Testament, Isaiah is perhaps the richest. Its literary grandeur is unequalled. Its scope is unparalleled. The breadth of its view of God is unmatched. In so many ways it is a book of superlatives. Thus it is no wonder that Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the NT..." Page 3 *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*.

The verses in this lesson from the prophecy of Isaiah will tell the story of a special baby who is to be born. This child will be like no other, and his life and death will change all of history. Some of the places and historical references may be unfamiliar, but the human emotions and experiences are timeless. As you study the passage, it will be helpful to consider what it meant to the audience for which it was written. However, what will be more important for you to consider is how its verses can speak to you as you celebrate this Christmas season.

Whether you use this study as a personal devotional or with a group, you will find short paragraphs in italics that will give you additional thoughts and information as you consider the questions. A glossary found at the end of the study will also provide helpful definitions. An asterisk will mark words found in the glossary.

Isaiah,\* the writer of the book, was a prophet\* who not only spoke and wrote about the future but challenged and advised the kings of Israel\* who ruled during his life time. He offered a voice of judgment to those who had turned away from God and comforted the people who were living in uncertain times. His prophecies were not only about earthly kingdoms, but about an eternal kingdom that would come as the result of a special child who would be born. This lesson will only cover a few verses out of this wonderful book, but they are verses that speak a Christmas message.

Note: The Bible references are taken from *The New International Version*.

## Isaiah 9:1-2

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.

**What are some of the contrasting images found in these two verses, and why do you think Isaiah used them?**

**The following verses from Psalm 130: 5-6 present a similar imagery.**

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
And in His word I put my hope.  
My soul waits for the Lord  
More than watchmen wait for the morning,  
More than watchmen wait for the morning.*

**What kind of emotional atmosphere do the people of Israel seem to be living under? What is to change?**

**Many people have conflicting emotions toward the Christmas season. Describe some of the emotions you experience during the holiday.**

**Midian's defeat** - a story found in the Old Testament book of Judges. Gideon, a reluctant warrior, routed the foreign oppressors, the Midianites, through God's supernatural power. You can read the entire story in Judges, chapters 6 and 7.

**Plunder** – a defeated enemies' goods that would be taken by the conquering army

**Prophets** – predicted the future and confronted those who rejected God. Sometimes, parts of their prophetic visions were realized in their lifetime, and some were written for the distant future.

**Yoke**- a device placed on an animal's neck, and used to control its movements. It could also be a device placed on people who were conquered to humiliate them and indicate servitude. "The Assyrian emperors delighted in telling how they imposed their heavy yokes upon captive peoples." Pages 243-244 *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*.

**Zeal of the Lord** – "Zeal and jealousy are two sides of the same concept. Both speak a kind of concern for someone that desires an exclusive place in that person's affections. 'Jealousy' as it is used today connotes a petty, self-centered, unreasoning interest. But its better connotation depicts a consuming concern for the other's best and an unwillingness that anything should hurt or destroy another." Page 248 *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*.

**Zebulun and Naphtali** – these two tribal names, perhaps in this context refers to the northern kingdom of Israel. "Though Isaiah was probably using these two tribal names to represent the northern kingdom, it is striking that Jesus' upbringing and early ministry was mostly in that very area near the sea of Galilee. His presence certainly 'honored' that area. In 732 BC, this northern portion of Israel became an Assyrian province...Under Gentile domination, that area was called Galilee of the Gentiles." Page 417 *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*

*The phrase “shadow of death” is also found in the familiar twenty-third Psalm. A famous preacher, Donald Grey Barnhouse, returning from his wife’s funeral sought a way to comfort his children about the death of their mother. As they were driving, a large truck cast a shadow over their car and Barnhouse explained how a real truck, if it hit them, could do real harm. By contrast, he explained, the shadow of the truck was harmless. Psalm 23 as well as Isaiah 9:2 describe death in this way. Young children fear shadows, but as adults we know they are harmless. Death is a mere shadow for those who trust in God, for the new “Light” has dawned.*

**What hope, both physical and spiritual, is given in this passage to those living in Isaiah’s day and in ours as well?**

### Isaiah 9:3-5

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. Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

**What are the feelings expressed in these verses, and what are the reasons for these feelings?**

**What are some events or experiences that would cause you to express yourself in this way?**

**Assyria** – A powerful empire headquartered in present day Iraq. The capital city was Nineveh. The Assyrians were known for their cruel treatment of those who resisted their conquest. They would have been the nation that threatened the people to whom Isaiah prophesied.

**By way of the Sea along the Jordan** – “Describes a major international highway running through the region of Israel. The invading Assyrian soldiers took that route when they invaded the Northern Kingdom.” Page 417 *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*

**David’s throne**- David is viewed as the greatest king of Israel. He was a musician and warrior who significantly enlarged the territory of Israel. God promised that the future Messiah would come from his family tree.

**Galilee**-This is the area of ancient Israel where Jesus grew up and did much of his ministry. It is the northernmost region of Israel.

**Jordan** – A major river in Israel having historical significance to the people of Israel. It needed to be crossed when they conquered Canaan, and Jesus was baptized in it by John the Baptist.

**Judah** – Another name for the southern kingdom that included the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and a portion of Simeon. This is in contrast to the northern kingdom also called Israel.

**Isaiah** – Son of Amos, his prophetic career covered at least twenty-five years and possibly as much as fifty years. Tradition has him suffering a martyr’s death.

**Israel** - Another name for the northern kingdom. It is sometimes referred to as the ten tribes of Israel. Before the country divided, it was the name used for both areas. Today it is used as the modern name for the Jewish state.

**Messiah** – The king who was to deliver the Jewish people. The Jewish people assumed he would be a political leader, but Jesus, the Christ (in the Greek language) and Messiah (in Hebrew) was the “anointed one” (the definition of Christ and Messiah ) who would save people spiritually.

As a follow up to the lesson, listen to Handel's Messiah. The chorus with the title, "For unto Us a Child is Born" is based on verses from the passage in this lesson. You can use the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MS3vpAWW2Zc>

*Optional Service Project:*

*You may be interested in a cause that looks ahead in hope to the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness. When that happens, the Bible tells us that then we will live with God, the earth will be restored, wars will cease, and pain and suffering will be no more.*

*Check with health, welfare, political action, denominational, and environmental agencies for ideas and help in getting started. Be creative! Follow the Lord's leading to do something that can make an impact for Christ in your community and beyond.*

*For example, you might help at a crisis pregnancy center, an immunization clinic, a blood drive, or a food program. Or you could clean up a roadway, waterway, or disaster site. You could also get involved in justice issues, anti-racism, or community safety. Or help with literacy and basic skills education, biblical literacy, acceptance and education of cognitively impaired persons, preservation of wildlife, stewardly use of land or purification of air and water.*

*Every area of our lives and of this world is under the authority of the Lord, our Savior, and he calls us to seek his kingdom and his righteousness as we live in the World*

**What are the implications of the uniforms of warfare being destroyed? (boots and cloaks being burned)?**

**How would this make the people in Isaiah's day feel?**

*Enlarging your nation in ancient times would have meant more territory, which would in turn mean more places to grow crops, more natural resources, and even safety from other countries since there would be a land buffer from other nations.*

**If you knew there would be no more war, how would your life be different?**

**What are some kinds of "yokes" people put on themselves?**

**Discuss ways that the celebration of Christmas can become a burden.**

Matthew 11:28-30 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

**As you read the words of Jesus found in the New Testament book of Matthew what are your thoughts?**

**In what ways might his promise alter the way you celebrate Christmas?**

*“A child, son (9:6) This reference to Jesus the Messiah\* is prophetic,*

### Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

*illustrating a literal yet unexpected fulfillment of prophecy. The Messiah is a child born, and yet He is also a Son given. Jesus came into our world as an infant even though He existed from eternity as God the Son.”(Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, The Bible Reader’s Companion)*

**How do the titles given to the Messiah impact your life? Use the following scriptures to expand your thoughts.**

Wonderful Counselor – Romans 11:33-34  
Mighty God, Everlasting Father – John 1:1-3  
Prince of Peace – Romans 5:1-5

### Isaiah 9:7

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 and forever. The zeal\* of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

*A helpful reference regarding “David’s Throne” can be found in Luke 1:26-33 when the angel speaks to Mary about the birth of Jesus. Other information comes from the two genealogies of Jesus listed in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3: 23-38. These verses show that Jesus came from the line of David. The differences in the genealogies may seem confusing at first glance, but further study shows important things about the lineage of Jesus and how the two genealogies actually fit together.*

**What type of government is described in these verses? What words and phrases give the impression that this is not a normal, earthly government?**

**What are the positive results of this government and who brings it about?**

**Picture a place where justice and righteousness are established forever. What would it be like in this place?**

**As you think on these possibilities, you may want to reflect on Revelation 21:1-5.**

**How can this picture of life give us hope as we celebrate the Christmas season?**