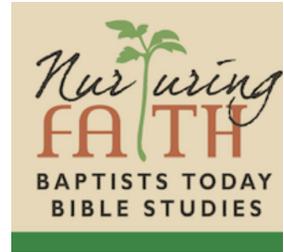


# Adult Teaching Resources

January 22, 2017



## Looking Forward (January 1-February 26)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 – “It’s Always Time”

Isaiah 42:1-9 – “A Time for Justice”

Isaiah 49:1-7 – “A Time for Light”

**Isaiah 9:1-4 – “A Time for Hope”**

Micah 6:1-8 - “A Time for Mercy”

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# A Time for Hope

*Isaiah 9:1-4*

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Opening

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Before beginning with today's Opening Activity, ask your group to report on their Challenge from the last meeting. What steps did each person take to shine God's light of grace and hope to all the nations? After a brief time of sharing and affirmation, move to the Opening.

#### **Light vs. Dark**

Today's Opening is a competition between small groups. Have your large group form smaller groups of around 4 in each group. Give each group a sheet of paper and a pen. Tell everyone the object of the competition is to make a list of as many unique "Light vs. Dark" references they can. They will get a point for each reference that other groups do not also list. Their references can come from any area of life or genre.

For example, one major Light vs. Dark reference is the Star Wars franchise—the Force is full of light and hope vs. the Dark Side which is, well, not.

Give everyone three minutes to make their lists. At the end of the time, have each group, one at a time, share one reference from their list. If that reference is on any other group's list, it does not count. If no one else has that reference, the group gets one point. Continue sharing references and checking against lists until all the references have either been shared or eliminated.

### Reading the Bible

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Today's passage might seem a little out of place in our calendar year. This passage, especially verses 6-7 feel more at home during Advent than during January. Yet, the timing of this passage is particularly powerful today as our new President took office a few days ago.

To help your group understand the text, ask these questions for understanding:

Describe the state of God's people in verse 1. Describe God's actions in the same verse.

What is the darkness the people have been walking in? What is the light?

What is said about God in this passage? What is it said that God has done? How is this consistent with God's actions with God's people?

## Reading the Bible *continued*

Why do you think the writer uses a military metaphor in this passage? What is the metaphor? What is the message within the metaphor?

What words are used to describe the child? How do you define: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace?

What will be the result of the child's actions? How will God benefit? How will the people benefit?

## Making Connections

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This passage was written in the 700s BCE for a specific people in a specific time. But, this passage continues to have applications and implications for us today.

Ask these questions to get your group talking about how this ancient text has meaning and significance for contemporary believers.

What is the darkness we experience? How would you compare it to the darkness from our passage?

Where do we find light that chases the darkness away? What is that light? How would you compare the light to the light in Isaiah?

What do you say about God? How often do you say them? To whom do you say those things to? Why?

Where do you look for help and hope in your life? In what ways have help and hope been delivered to you?

What are the signs of hope in this passage? What are the signs of hope you cling to? How are they similar? How are they different?

What is your hope for God and God's kingdom? What do you think is God's role in making that happen? What do you think is your role in making that happen? What are you doing about it?

## So What?

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Earlier this week our new President took office. The peaceful transition of power is one of the hallmarks of our country. As President Trump took the oath of office, many Americans cheered and celebrated and many Americans wallowed in misery. This is not the first time our Presidential election has evoked those conflicting emotions and probably will not be the last time, either.

The timing of the Inauguration coupled with our passage from Isaiah presents a timely opportunity to answer this one powerful question:

Where is our hope?

Ask your group to consider this question, in light of the events of the week and the change in leadership. The “Sunday School” answer is that we find our hope in God. But do we, really? Follow up and push back a little, if appropriate, with these questions:

How much hope do we place in our elected officials?

How much hope do we place in our family and friends?

How much hope do we place in ourselves?

Where we do place our hope in others, our ultimate hope should rest in God, who is the light that chases the dark away. Isaiah had it right with this passage. Only God can provide what we need and desire.

## The Challenge

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This week, pay attention to moments in your life where you experience darkness and then experience light. The darkness doesn't have to be visually dark, like at night. The darkness can be a mood, an emotion, news reports, etc. As you become aware of the darkness, make a conscious effort to pray to God to bring light to the darkness and provide hope.

## Prayer

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Close your time listening to Handel's, “Messiah.” Ask everyone to read the words from Isaiah 9:1-7 as the song is played (everyone may remain seated), and use the time as an opportunity for everyone in your group to pray silently.

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Isaiah of Jerusalem** – The previous three lessons were drawn from the part of the book known as “Second Isaiah” (chapters 40-55), when many natives of Judah were living in exile, somewhere in Babylon. Many were second or third generation exiles who had never seen Jerusalem.

Today’s text is from the first part of the book, commonly attributed to the first prophet to write under the name Isaiah. He lived and preached in Jerusalem in the 8th century BCE, before either the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah had yet been fully conquered. He is typically known as “First Isaiah” or “Isaiah of Jerusalem.”

**Dark days** – The social and political setting of Isaiah 9 reflects a very troubled time in the history of Judah and Israel. Isaiah prophesied during the last half of the 8th century, BCE, at a time when the united kingdom of David and Solomon had been divided for 200 years. The first half of the 8th century had been a relatively stable and prosperous time for both the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah), but things began to erode with the rise of the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727), referred to in the Bible as “Pul.” A powerful ruler, he quickly conquered Babylonia to the South and Urartu to the North. He then moved against Syria, Tyre, Israel, and Judah, no later than 738.

King Menaham of Israel (752-742) paid heavy tribute to Assyria as the price of relative independence (2 Kgs. 15:19-20), as did his son Pekahiah (742-740). This was not a popular course, however. With the assistance of fifty men from Gilead (an area east of the Sea of Galilee), a man named Pekah assassinated Pekahiah and seized the throne (740-732). In an effort to stand against the oppressive Assyrians, Pekah made an alliance with Rezin, the king of Syria, along with the Philistines and Egyptians. Biblical historians often refer to this as the “Syro-Ephraimitic Coalition.”

Pekah and Rezin tried to draw Judah into the anti-Assyrian alliance, but King Jotham (750-732) refused. In an effort to force Judah to join the coalition, troops from Israel and Syria invaded Judah (2 Kings 15:37). About the same time, Jotham died and his 20-year-old son Ahaz succeeded him on the throne. Pekah and Rezin sought to depose Ahaz, but Isaiah counseled him to trust in God, assuring him that God would deal with the two “smoldering stumps of firebrands” (7:2-9). Ahaz did not listen, however, and appealed to the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser to protect him against his northern neighbors (2 Kgs. 16:7-9).

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Isaiah predicted that the coalition would fall and that Judah would come under increasing Assyrian domination. His predictions were correct: within a few years the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered and many residents were carried into captivity by Tiglath-Pileser's successors, Shalmaneser V (727-722) and Sargon II (722-705). Judah retained its national identity, but effectively became a vassal of Assyria (2 Kgs. 16:10-18), forced to pay tribute to avoid an outright invasion.

**Zebulun and Naphtali** – Why would Zebulun and Naphtali be the first to fall? The Mesopotamian powers of Assyria and Babylon were located east of Israel, but they could not march through the desert and attack from that direction. Instead, they followed the main roads up and around the “Fertile Crescent,” west and south through Syria and Phoenicia, so that they arrived in Israel from the north. As two of the northernmost tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali would have been the first to be overrun by the Assyrian forces and thus forcefully “brought into contempt.” Dan, the tribe furthest north, may have already lost its territory, since it is not mentioned.

Naphtali's downfall was recounted in 2 Kings 15:29: “In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried the people captive to Assyria.”

The defeat of Naphtali described in 2 Kings 15:29 appears to match a campaign described in Tiglath Pileser III's own records, which were preserved on clay tablets, many of which have survived. James B. Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ANET) includes a translation of an Assyrian military report usually dated to 733 BCE. The report speaks of an expedition that reached the Mediterranean near Byblos, north of Israel, before the army turned south. The commander then lists places he conquered (note that Assyrian and Hebrew spellings are often different). The text is broken, with an ellipsis (. . .) representing missing words or syllables: “. . . nite, Gal'za, Abilakka which are adjacent to Bit Hu-umria (Israel) the land of . . . li, in its entire extent, I united with Assyria. Officers of mine I installed as governors over them” (ANET [Princeton University Press, 1969], 283). “Bit Hu-umria,” or the “House of Omri,” was a typical Assyrian name for Israel, which was ruled for many years by Omri and his descendants. Abilakka is probably Abel-beth-maacah.

**Name that genre** – Commentators are divided over how to classify Isa. 9:2-7. It is clearly poetry, but used to what end? The text has some similarities to a psalm of thanksgiving, for vv. 3-4 address God as “you,” and vv. 4-6 list reasons to be thankful. But, thanksgiving psalms usually contain an invitation or “call to praise” that is lacking here.

Some scholars have compared the text to Egyptian accession hymns that accompanied the coronation of a new king. In such hymns, it was typical for the new king to be assigned special titles, such as those listed in 9:6b. There is a question as to how familiar that practice would have been to Isaiah, though.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Others consider the text to be a royal birth announcement, and see a possible connection with the earlier prediction of a child to be called “Immanuel” whose birth would usher in a happier age (7:10-17).

Note that the Revised Common Lectionary cites only vv. 1-4 as the text for the day, but it makes no sense to stop at v. 4 when the oracle clearly continues through v. 7.

**Tense and tension** – The verbs in vv. 2-6 are mostly in a form that Hebrew scholars often call “perfect,” though some call it the “affix” form. Typically, verbs in this form are translated by the English past tense as completed action. The prophets often used the perfect form to describe future events, a manner of writing sometimes called the “prophetic perfect.” Though speaking of things to come, God’s fulfillment of the promises was believed to be so certain that it could be spoken of as having happened already. The verbal forms shift to imperfect in v. 7, which appears to speak to the future. The mixture of past and future tense verbs adds a natural tension to the reading as we try to puzzle out the prophet’s meaning.

**“Not,” or “his”?** – In v. 3, the preserved Hebrew text literally reads “You enlarge the nation, you do not increase the joy,” but such a reading is an internal contradiction. There is obviously a problem with the text here, and fortunately, it is easy to solve. The word translated as “not” (*lō*) is pronounced exactly as the word meaning “its” (*lō*). At some point, a scribe must have misspelled the word when copying the text. The Masoretes responsible for preserving the text recognized the problem long ago. Rather than changing the text, however, they inserted the correct spelling in brackets beside the incorrect version, indicating that readers should choose the alternate version.

**Royal report cards** – In the books of 1-2 Kings, the author/editor closed the account of each king of Israel or Judah with a summary judgment with regard to the monarch’s faithfulness or failure in living up to Israel’s covenant with God. Of all the kings listed, only Josiah and Hezekiah were given unqualified praise (see Hezekiah’s evaluation in 2 Kgs. 18:5-7).

**How many titles?** – The various names given to the coming king have occasioned much discussion. Does the collection of impressive words indicate four titles? Five? More?

The words typically translated as “wonderful,” “counselor,” “mighty,” and “God” are written separately, while the two words translated as “everlasting father” are written together in Hebrew, and the two words for “Prince of Peace” are connected in the text with a hyphen.

One might suggest, then, that there are six titles: “Wonderful,” “Counselor,” “Mighty One,” “God,” “Everlasting Father,” and “Prince of Peace.”

It seems best, however, to follow the lead of the last two titles and interpret the list as four epithets made of paired words, whether they are written together or not. Thus, “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” and “Prince of Peace” would be honorifics used to describe the coming king.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

**A forever father?** – How do we understand the title “Everlasting Father”? Contemporary Christians often refer to God as “Father,” perhaps following the pattern set by Jesus, but it was unusual for God to be called “Father” in the Old Testament. There are a few instances in which God is described as a father (Deut. 32:6; 2 Sam. 7:14; Jer. 3:4, 19; Isa. 63:16; Mal. 2:10), but combination terms like “Everlasting Father” are otherwise unknown.

Kings were even less likely to be called “father” among the Hebrews (1 Sam. 24:11 is a rare exception), but the term was not inappropriate for a good and compassionate leader.

Likewise, individuals are not thought of as being “everlasting” in Hebrew thought, but God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 was said to ensure a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). Perhaps, then, we are to think of the coming king as one who would perpetuate the everlasting dynasty promised to David.

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

## Did Isaiah predict the coming of Christ?

When Isaiah spoke the hopeful words of Isa. 9:2-7, did he have in mind an earthly king who would bring a quick end to the Assyrian threat, or did his vision intentionally look beyond to a messianic ruler who would usher in the eschatological end of the age?

The truth is, no one can look into the prophet's mind and know for sure what he intended. However, we are confident that the Hebrew prophets generally addressed their message to people in their own time and context, so it is most likely that Isaiah was expressing high hopes that Hezekiah and his rule would become the embodied fulfillment of God's promise to David.

Some believe that Isaiah was looking further into the future, thinking of a future Messiah with divine attributes. The recorded preaching of Isaiah of Jerusalem, however, never uses the term "messiah," a Hebrew word that literally means "anointed." Second Isaiah, the prophet of the exile, spoke of "God's anointed" deliverer (45:1) – but with specific reference to Cyrus, the Persian ruler who conquered Babylon and granted Hebrew exiles the right to return home. Third Isaiah, who spoke both comforting and challenging words during the postexilic period, used the term in 61:1, declaring that "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me ..." a text that Jesus later cited as a sort of mission statement.

Looking back from our perspective, we know that neither Hezekiah nor any other Hebrew ruler ever achieved anything approaching the illustrious predictions of Isa. 9:2-7. As time went on, the Jewish people recognized that the promise to David seemed unfulfilled, so their hopes began to focus on a future day when a divinely anointed Messiah would rise up introduce a new age of salvation and hope for Israel. This messianic hope developed mainly in the late postexilic period, however, long after Isaiah of Jerusalem's time.

Today we are likely to view Isaiah's oracle through the lens of the New Testament, seeing Jesus as the only one worthy of being called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. We see Christ as the one who inaugurated the eternal Kingdom of God into human history and the one who will bring about its ultimate, eternal fulfillment. What Isaiah saw taking place through military victory and strong rule on earth, we tend to see in spiritual terms that equate salvation with eternal life in a heavenly kingdom.

So, it is likely that Isaiah truly hoped that Hezekiah would prove to be the Davidic ruler of his dreams, but when that did not happen, later generations sought the fulfillment of his promise through a delivering "Messiah" who was yet to come. Many Jewish people still await the Messiah's arrival, but those who follow Jesus called him "Christ" – the Greek term for "anointed" – believing him to be the promised prince of Isaiah's announcement.