

Week 4

Isaiah 9:1-7 "Oppression that needs Lifting"

Begin with prayer

Lord God,

We know we often live lives inattentive to the hurts and needs of those around us.

We ask that you will help us to truly see others, please open our hearts and our eyes.

Help us to care and advocate for those who face oppression and experience injustice. Lord, help us not only to see it, but to fight it.

Help us to be your agents in this world, seeking your will and loving your people.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen

Read the text for today. (Suggestion: Go around and read it out loud, each person taking a verse.)

Ask: What stood out to you about this text? What, if anything, doesn't make sense? What caught your attention and sparked curiosity?

Isaiah 9 begins in the dark. Isaiah paints a grim portrait. The people of Israel have been living in the dark. They have been dwelling in the chilly shadow of death. Worse, he tells us in verse 4 that the people have been afflicted by a burdensome yoke. A kind of heavy bar across their shoulders, as they are driven forward under the stinging blows of an oppressor's rod and whip. The images here are awful. Isaiah goes on in verse 5 to talk about warrior's boots and about garments rolled in blood.

Isaiah was referring to the exile of the people of Judah during the seventh century B.C. However, this could just as well stand as a description for the many examples of humanity's larger enslavement to sin and evil. At any moment, you can locate people who are suffering under an oppressive regime somewhere. Think of the genocide in the Sudan in recent years, or the refugees fleeing Syria today. Think back to the slaughter that took place in Rwanda in the 1990's, as well as the dreadful violence that gripped Sierra Leone. Think of the Jews marching into Nazi gas chambers in the Holocaust, or Native Americans on this continent suffering and dying on the Trail of Tears.

Beyond literal enslavement or oppression, we all know that there are multiple ways we suffer from burdens that oppress our hearts, minds, and spirits. Even modern-day Americans can be an oppressed people. Americans live in one of the most free societies on earth. Millions are comfortable in terms of income, lifestyle, and opportunities, yet in some ways North America also is a mess.

You can't get out of the grocery store without being overwhelmed in the checkout aisle by a dozen different magazines. Most of these magazines feature women and men whose bodies and airbrushed good looks proclaim that the goal of our lives should be physical beauty. Since these magazines that feature all those skinny women and handsome men are usually situated right next to the Snickers and M&Ms, you can't help but get the funny feeling that someone is conspiring to make you despair!

This cultural silliness seems trivial compared to the Sudan or the Holocaust. Yet there is a connection. There is something about the nature of this world that keeps us in bondage one way or another. When and where the devil can oppress people in violent, dreadful ways, he will do so. But the devil has always been a flexible, world-class opportunist. If he can't oppress us in one way, he will find another. We find ourselves complicit to racism and sexism; or suffering under the oppression of racism and sexism. We face addictions and temptations on a daily basis, sometimes failing under their weight.

Make no mistake: the yoke of oppression that needs lifting (verse 4) is still with us and it has a thousand different forms. It vandalizes shalom. It wrecks human flourishing in God's good creation. The yoke must be broken, and the burden of slavery must be lifted and shattered. What is needed to lift the burden? What is needed for those of us who live in the valley of the shadow of Death? We need the Prince of Peace, the Mighty God who came into this world to make all things new. We need the One who is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

Let's talk about it:

- How do you see the devil's oppression around you?
- What lies is your culture telling that you're believing? What kind of hard work will you need to do to combat the lies? How can/do we pray about these things?
- How are you participating (complicit) in some kind of oppression? How about racism, sexism, or ageism?
- How can we begin to unlearn oppression?
- After the darkness of judgment, the light of grace will dawn. God's people will be filled with joy because "a child is born...a son is given." What do the four titles of this son in verse 6 tell us about who he is and what he will do? Which title resonates most with you today?