

## Isaiah 8:19-9:4

<sup>19</sup>When they tell you, “Consult the mediums and the spiritists, who whisper and mutter,” shouldn’t a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? <sup>20</sup>To the law and to the testimony! If people do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them. <sup>21</sup>They will pass through the land, distressed and starving, but when this takes place and they are starving, they will be frustrated, and they will curse their king and their God. They will turn their faces upward, <sup>22</sup>and then they will look down to the ground, but I tell you, they will see only distress, darkness, and the gloom that brings anguish. They will be banished into thick darkness.

<sup>9:1</sup>Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for the land that was in anguish. In former times, he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will cause it to be glorious, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles.

<sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

For those living in the land of the shadow of death, the light has dawned.

<sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy.

They rejoice before you like the joy at harvest time,  
like the celebration when people divide the plunder.

<sup>4</sup>For you have shattered the yoke that burdened them.

You have broken the bar on their shoulders and the rod of their oppressor,  
as you did in the day of Midian.

## From Darkness to Light

### I.

Where does one look for advice? When researching a specific type of product, one might look to user reviews on all the various choices. You might check to see where the product is made to determine how durable it will be. The materials used in the manufacturing process might be important—aside from the durability factor, they might dictate whether the product will perform as well as you would like.

I don’t know about you, but when I’m spending money on something, I like to get as much information as I can. I want to make an informed decision about which product to choose and which to avoid.

What about when it comes to the leader of a country and decisions about national security? Lots of information is out there to be sifted through.

These days the intelligence community looks at electronic information they have acquired by listening to phone calls or by intercepted emails or other communications. There is satellite surveillance that might add to or corroborate intercepted communications. Monitoring web traffic of many kinds other than email is also done. Most valuable of all is the information gleaned from someone who is on-scene wherever it is that is the potential security threat—human intelligence, they call it.

Once all the intelligence is gathered and sifted through, it is presented to the nation’s leader. That leader will direct the action he or she deems appropriate based on the best information and the thoughts of trusted advisors.

The king had been willing to sift through any kind of intelligence source he could. He was willing to look almost anywhere for advice. After all, he had a country to run.

As information and intelligence came in it was sorted appropriately, at least, appropriately where it concerned this particular king. It’s only natural that some sources are more believed than others. Presumably they will be more credible; their information is more likely to be correct. That information is given greater weight when making any determinations.

The natural human thing to do is to give more weight to certain sources based on one’s own biases. Some things are distinctly unpleasant to consider. Often, until those unpleasant things give a virtual slap in the face, the tendency is to ignore them.

This exposes one of the biggest problems leaders of nations tend to have: their own egos. There is a tendency to surround oneself with yes-men. Anyone giving a contrary opinion is putting his job, or even his life, at risk.

This describes King Ahaz. You remember Ahaz. He's the one who tried to sound very pious when he put on his best righteous airs and proclaimed: "I will not ask. I will not test the LORD" (Isaiah 7:12, EHV). It was then that Isaiah prophesied the coming of Jesus by the virgin birth.

Ahaz wanted to listen only to the sources he liked. He would seek help from any source; he would even seek advice from supernatural means. But he would *not* ask the Lord. He did *not* want to hear from the prophet Isaiah.

The attitudes of King Ahaz and others in Israel were what Isaiah is referring to when he says: "When they tell you, 'Consult the mediums and the spiritists, who whisper and mutter,' shouldn't a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?" (Isaiah 8:19, EHV).

## II.

Where does a person turn for answers? Where do you seek to learn the truth?

The sad reality is that too many seek anything but God's truth. It still happens all the time. I guess you don't see many people taking fortune tellers and tarot card readers seriously these days, but they still turn to other sources than God for the truth.

Isaiah identifies the correct source for advice: "To the law and to the testimony!" (Isaiah 8:20, EHV). The law was a common way of indicating all of God's Word, not just the Torah, or the first five books of the Bible written by Moses. It didn't refer only to God's law as opposed to the gospel, either; it's referring to all of God's Word. Testimony refers to the fact that things are repeated again and again. God's Word regularly reiterates things to us so that we get opportunity after opportunity to understand.

What happens when one ignores the law and the testimony? "There will be no dawn for them. <sup>21</sup> ... They will turn their faces upward, <sup>22</sup> and then they will look down to the ground, but I tell you, they will see only distress, darkness, and the gloom that brings anguish. They will be banished into thick darkness" (Isaiah 8:20-22, EHV).

Anywhere else people might turn for information, they will not see God's answers. No matter how desperately they try to understand, it will all be futile.

Not only will it be futile, it will be distressing. The Hebrew has three different words for darkness in these verses. The first one, translated darkness in the EHV, just means a lack of light. The next one the EHV translates "the gloom that brings anguish." That word indicates sadness or discouragement—even depression. The third, translated "thick darkness," means being unable to see or function with an association of depression leading to terror.

Ahaz had asked for help from other kingdoms and rulers; he had sought information and advise from mediums and spiritists and those claiming to speak to the dead. But he had ignored and actively rebuffed any advice from the Lord and the prophets he sent. He did not want God. He would be banished to thick darkness—depression that leads to terror.

Where are you? Are you going through life with a lack of light because you have begun to seek advice and information from places other than God and his Word? Perhaps you feel the distress that begins to bring with it.

Maybe you have the next one: the gloom that brings anguish. Sadness, discouragement, depression. There are people with clinical depression. That's not what Isaiah is referring to. If you have clinical depression, you need the help of physicians who can prescribe the correct medication to help you deal with it. The depression Isaiah speaks of is the depression that comes when you ignore what God has to say to you in his Word. Perhaps you don't even feel depression at first; perhaps ignoring God makes you feel pretty good. But your conscience inside you is becoming depressed. Ignoring God does not lead to a happy place.

I pray that none of you have entered the thick darkness of depression leading to terror. This

describes those who are well on the way to absolutely rejecting God and his will and his Word.

“They will pass through the land, distressed and starving” (Isaiah 8:21, EHV). Distressed and starving describes the unbeliever who turns aside from God and turns toward myths. Starving in the darkness. Starving for the light of the truth.

### III.

Isaiah doesn't leave people starving. One chapter ends with the message of being banished to thick darkness, but the next chapter begins: “Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for the land that was in anguish” (Isaiah 9:1, EHV).

“Gloom...in anguish” sounds familiar, doesn't it? It should. Isaiah picked the same word he used before. The gloom that brings anguish will not be allowed to stand. God himself will do away with the sin that brings such gloomy anguish.

“In former times, he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will cause it to be glorious, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles. <sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. For those living in the land of the shadow of death, the light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:1-2, EHV).

It sounds just like the gospel for today, doesn't it? It should. Matthew quoted Isaiah, saying that Jesus came to fulfill all that was said in today's First Reading. Jesus relocated to the region of Zebulun and Naphtali specifically to fulfill this prophecy. Jesus came to bring light. He came to be the light. The Christmas gospel from John chapter 1 spoke of him as: “The light of mankind. <sup>5</sup>The light is shining in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5, EHV). Not any one of the three kinds of darkness Isaiah used in the Hebrew could overcome the light of Jesus.

“You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you like the joy at harvest time, like the celebration when people divide the plunder. <sup>4</sup>For you have shattered the yoke that burdened them” (Isaiah 9:3-4, EHV).

We aren't farmers in Grand Rapids, so the joy of harvest time might escape us. But Thanksgiving Day comes and we enjoy getting together with family and friends to rejoice over all our blessings. New Years' Eve comes and we get together to have a party. That's the kind of joy our God brings us.

God brings us that joy by shattering the yoke that burdens. In farming, oxen were yoked together so they would pull evenly. A yoke on a human means that you are fastened to something in such a way that you can't break free.

The yoke that binds us is sin. Sin is such a permanent part of life that no mere human being ever stands a chance of getting away. As soon as we think we are winning, sin crouches at the door and lures us back in. There is a constant struggle against sin—a struggle that was destined to lead to darkness.

The Lord Jesus shattered that dark yoke of sin that kept us fastened to a life of misery. We have been set free. It didn't happen because we tried really hard, or because we deserved it. It happened because Jesus came as that light. He died on the cross to sacrifice himself for all the sins that tried to keep us in the darkness of unbelief.

### IV.

Our Second Reading said: “This is how we know that we are in him: <sup>6</sup>The one who says he remains in him should walk as Jesus walked” (1 John 2:5-6, EHV).

The yoke of sin has been shattered. Jesus has paid for all your sin, taking it to the cross. The gloomy darkness has been done away with and has been replaced by joy. Now, live as a child of God. You will never walk as Jesus walked perfectly. You don't even do it trying to gain favor with God; that will only lead you back to gloomy darkness and depression. You walk as Jesus walked because you love him; you appreciate the salvation he won for you; you want to say thank you to him for what he has done for you.

Many are still living in the land of the shadow of death. Gloomy darkness still threatens them. Walk as Jesus walked. Be their light. Show them the great light that frees those walking in the darkness, so that they, too, may move from darkness to light. Amen.