

Isaiah 9:1-7 - Wonderful Counselor

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Amen. Thank you guys so much. I love Christmas a lot. Some of the gifts that God has given to this church are people like this who serve us.

Yeah, you can thank them. There's others who do things like this with flowers and Christmas trees that I don't do.

And they use their gifts on Saturday so you don't actually see them and get to thank them for that. But it's not just to have fun and just to make something look nice or sound good.

But because we're celebrating something we believe to be worthy of this kind of joy and excitement, right? It's not just the spirit of a season but the reality of God becoming man that deserves for us to have that kind of joy.

[1 : 05] And it's just a gift to see all of you use your gifts in that way, especially to serve this body. So thank you for the many ways that you do that. As we enter this Christmas season, we're starting a new sermon series as well and looking at who Jesus is.

Back about 15 years ago as we approached the turn of the millennium in late 1999, Time magazine ran a cover story that was written by novelist Reynolds Price.

He wrote this, It would require much exotic calculation to deny that the single most powerful figure, not merely in these two millenniums but in all human history, has been Jesus of Nazareth.

Not only is the prevalent system of denoting the years based on an erroneous 6th century calculation of the date of his birth, but a serious argument can be made that no one else's life has proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus.

It's an astonishing conclusion in light of the fact that Jesus was a man who lived a short life in a rural backwater of the Roman Empire, who died in agony as a convicted criminal, and who may never have intended so much as a small portion of the effects worked in his name.

[2 : 31] Who was Jesus then? That's the question, isn't it? Who was Jesus then? What child is this? Who was Jesus?

Price gives some of his answer in the rest of that article that he wrote, but for hundreds of years, individuals and world religions have been giving answers to that question, haven't they?

A variety of different answers, and it's a question that's well worth our time to consider. Jesus is near the top of every reputable, most influential people of all time list.

He's changed the world in many ways. His birth is going to be celebrated in a variety of ways the world over later this month, right? By people who believe a wide range of different things about who he is, who have broadly different answers to that question, who is Jesus?

Almost everyone these days agrees that there was indeed a baby who grew up and was a man who lived in the Middle East, and was called Jesus.

[3 : 42] Very few people dispute that anymore. But they don't agree on who Jesus really was. And the different answers that they give about his identity lead to radically different life paths, don't they?

C.S. Lewis has famously said that Jesus was either a liar, or a lunatic, or the Lord of all. That was his famous trilemma.

Who is Jesus? Either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord of all. Now, that may seem like three simple choices, but those are very different options, aren't they? Very different answers to the question of who Jesus is.

So it's a very important issue for all of us. We want to look this Christmas season at the identity of Jesus. See what the Bible declares about this unique child.

We're going to do that by looking at four titles that he was given even before his birth, and ask what they tell us about the child born that first Christmas, how we see those titles expressed in Jesus' life as he grows up.

[4 : 47] So what child is this is the question. Let's read the context of these titles in Isaiah 9. We're going to start reading at verse 1. But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.

In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. You've multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[6 : 06] Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Thus far God's holy, inerrant, infallible word. Will you pray with me? Father, these are words we've heard before in different contexts.

But they're not our words. They're not words we say or words we sing. They are indeed your words. And so we ask that you would teach us.

That you, Holy Spirit, would be the one who shows us not just what they mean, but what they mean for our hearts and in our lives. Would you take hearts that are easily distracted, hearts that are easily self-reliant, and would you make them desirous of hearing from you?

That you might teach us and that you might change us and that we might know Jesus more as a result of looking at your word together. We ask it in his name.

[7 : 23] Amen. Amen. I remember holding each of my girls in the hospital room on the day that they were born and, you know, looking at them. They're so small.

And as a dad, you start to wonder, don't you? You know, what's she going to be like? What kind of things is she going to love? What will she do?

What will she be like? Who will she look like? What will she love? Will she love me? That was one of those questions that was on my mind. Lots of hopes and dreams for what this child will be.

As we approach Christmas this year and we see the baby in the manger, we have the privilege of knowing about this baby because we're looking back, aren't we? Who was and is Jesus?

What child is this that we look on in the manger? God had more than just hopes and dreams for that child, right? We find out here in Isaiah that even as God looks ahead to the life of His Son in this prophecy, He says here's what He's going to be like.

[8 : 33] The Son He was giving to His people, the child to be born, the Son to be given, was to be the long-awaited deliverer and King. The Messiah that God had promised to send who would reign on David's throne forever, right?

Look at verse 7. This is who He's going to be. On the throne of David over His kingdom, He's going to establish it and uphold it with justice. He's going to be the one who rules justly. The one who's righteous, who does things right.

And not just for a little while, but from this time forth and forevermore. That's who He's going to be. Isaiah had prophesied hard days ahead, hadn't he?

You know the book of Isaiah. There's a lot of difficult things He says are coming for God's people. But He also holds out hope. The hope promised when Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden but told that God would send rescue for them.

The hope promised to Abraham that His people would be a great nation and that all nations would be blessed through them. The hope promised to David that an heir would rule forever even as the Gentiles would stream into His kingdom.

[9 : 47] And now God is saying what? He's saying He's coming. This is the one. This is that one. The one I've been telling you about. The one I've been saying is coming.

That's this one. What will He be like? Verse 6 gives us those four titles that are hard to hear without Handel's Messiah ringing in your head.

Right? You know, Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God. I'm going to stop singing but you've got the general drift. That was from Handel, the Messiah. It's really famous.

It just doesn't sound like that. And so we hear those notes in our head when we hear these but stop and just look at them again. We're going to look at them in turn but Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Those are not mere wishes for what His Son might become one day. What He would be like. Those are promises from God the Father of who this child will be.

[10 : 52] We're going to take just the first one this morning. Wonderful Counselor. Look at that for just a minute. Wonderful Counselor. Literally, the words mean wonder of a counselor.

That word counselor in Isaiah's context refers to someone who makes wise plans, who gives helpful guidance. This child is going to be a ruler, a king, who leads his people in the proper direction, on the right path.

In fact, for a people described in this chapter here as walking in darkness and dwelling in a land of deep darkness, He will be a light, shining the way forward, directing them in the proper paths for their protection and for their flourishing.

But this is going to be more than a politician with a few good ideas, right? I mean, Judah and Israel have known some pretty decent kings, haven't they? Judah especially. They've had some guys with some good ideas, some good plans.

And what happens as you read back through the history of God's people to even the best kings they have with the really good ideas and plans for God's people? What's the pattern? Over and over again, even the best ones, and they're not all good at all, fail.

[12 : 13] They lead the people well momentarily, but then they mislead the people into idolatry, into conflict, even into exile away from God's promised land.

And God says, this baby in the manger is more than just an above average counselor. Like somebody who usually has some nice thoughts that are helpful with something.

He is a wonderful counselor. He will give, that word actually means supernatural direction. He will have wisdom that is beyond human comprehension.

It won't just be the wisest of your friends. He will make divine plans unfold. In fact, as we keep reading in Isaiah, we find these same terms for wonderful counselor used for God Himself.

The Lord of hosts, God Almighty, described how in Isaiah 28, the Lord of hosts is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.

[13 : 19] Wonderful in counsel. God Himself, it's the way God's described in His counsel, in His plans that stand firm and are always accomplished, in His wisdom that surpasses all other wisdom.

This child will be divine. He will be the wonderful counselor who surpasses all others. Where do we see that reality in the life of Jesus as this baby in the manger grows into a man?

Where do we see it as we look at the Gospels? I think one of the primary places we see it is in the teaching of Jesus as He explains the plans of God, the design for our lives, the direction He gives as to where life is to be found.

God, perhaps especially we see it in a place like the Sermon on the Mount which may be Jesus' most famous extended teaching lesson on life, right?

Jesus delivering in that sermon remarkable wisdom, sayings, and moral teachings that Christians and non-Christians alike to this day declare as wise, think are helpful.

[14 : 31] Things like the Golden Rule, the Beatitudes, many others. But I want to notice something particular about this sermon. In the Old Testament, God's prophet Moses is leading His people, right?

And God wants to give His law, His plan for His people to Moses and what happens? Where does Moses go? Moses goes up on Mount Sinai, right? Moses meets with God there on Mount Sinai and God sends him back down and what's Moses carrying when he comes down the mountain?

Two tablets with some laws written on them. God's laws. We often refer to them as the Ten Commandments. Moses comes back down the mountain and says, this is God's wise plan for our lives.

And now in the Sermon on the Mount, what does Jesus do? Jesus goes up on a mountain, but Jesus sits and stays, doesn't He? Jesus stays up on the mountain and He doesn't bring down tablets of stone.

He speaks God's law, doesn't He? He actually Himself pronounces God's wise plans. The prophet who Hebrews tells us is greater than Moses, He Himself delivers the counsel.

[15 : 50] He goes back to commandments like, don't murder, don't commit adultery. Others from the Ten Commandments and says, you've heard one thing about this, but I tell you the truth.

This is what God means. This is God's heart when He gives you His law. This is where life is truly found. He Himself provides the counsel, the authoritative, divine, wise plan.

And the crowds notice. They hear Him teach in the Sermon on the Mount. Do you remember how they respond at the end of that? Matthew records it this way in His Gospel.

When Jesus finished these sayings, the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were astonished at His teaching. For He was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.

They marveled. They were astonished. They stood open-mouthed, not just at the wisdom of what He said, not just at the sayings, not just that that was cute or that was creative where that might be helpful.

[16 : 58] But this guy has authority that I've never heard from the best human teachers. From those who've given me the best direction, there's something different.

Jesus' teaching has remained highly regarded for centuries since it was first recorded. He communicates everything we need to know for life. He talks about what our priorities are to be, whom we can trust, how we're to deal with difficulty and conflict and suffering and much, much more.

And that's what it means among other things to say that Jesus is a wonderful counselor. He unfolds God's wise plans for His people. He gives people direction to where life is found, where true flourishing is.

He offers unparalleled leadership in the right paths. That's a pretty big statement to make of a baby in a manger, of a child in this case yet to be born.

It's a big deal to be able to identify Jesus in that way. But I want us to consider another question this morning. Not just who is Jesus?

[18 : 12] What child is this? Not just that question, but who is Jesus to me? If there's any other question that would be more important than who is Jesus, it may be the question, who is Jesus to me?

And I don't mean by that that each of us gets to identify Jesus any way we please. That we can make Him out to be whoever we'd like Him to be. That would be as ridiculous as walking around the newborn wing of a hospital and naming babies however you wanted them to be named.

You know, you walk into a room and the parents say, this is Jimmy and you say, no, you know what? I'm going to go with Mike. You don't get that privilege.

We don't get to unilaterally decide His identity and make Him whatever we want Him to be. We do, however, have to decide how we personally respond to who Jesus is.

That's what I mean by the question, who is Jesus to me? Let me see if I can explain the vital difference between those two things this way. It's the difference between knowing the identity of a great chef and actually tasting some of His food.

[19 : 35] It's the difference between walking down the streets of New Orleans and seeing Emeril Lagasse walking down the other side and saying, oh, I know that guy. I recognize him from the Food Network.

He's a great chef. He's that guy that goes bam, bam, bam all the time. I know him. Great chef. It's the difference between that and actually sitting down and savoring Emeril's chicken gumbo one bite at a time and personally feeling bam, bam, bam.

wow, I'm actually tasting that this guy is a great chef. It's kind of like the difference in some ways in hearing about this wonderful place called Disney World and looking at all of the happy people in their Facebook pictures as they've gone there and talk about how great it is and then actually going and seeing the magical looks on your daughter's faces as they dance with princesses and ride rides and that sort of thing.

It's a very different experience to be there rather than just hear about it or know some facts about it, isn't it? That's actually what we all need.

It's what God wants for us with his son not merely to know a set of facts but actually to experience Jesus. Jesus. Many of us I know a lot of you have known for years things about the identity of Jesus but have we personally experienced them?

[21 : 15] Are we personally experiencing him as for example our wonderful counselor? Not just a wonderful counselor but my wonderful counselor.

It's not much good to know someone is a wonderful counselor if you never find yourself under his counsel. What would that look like in your life for Jesus to be your wonderful counselor?

How would you explain that to someone who didn't understand that Jesus is actively your wonderful counselor? Think about that.

How would you? How is Jesus your wonderful counselor? Let me suggest two areas this morning where we could consider that reality in our own lives.

The first is Jesus as light in our darkness. I don't know if you've ever been in a cave where you can get utter darkness where you turn off all the lights and it's completely dark.

[22 : 21] Not too long ago my family and I went to cathedral caverns. It's not far away if you haven't been there you can go actually do this yourself. It's a great place. And at the end of your journey into the caverns you stop and you turn out all the lights and there's this moment where you can't see your hand in front of your face.

You don't even know that it's there. If you turn around even once it's difficult to reorient yourself. Which direction am I facing? Which wall is on which side of me?

It's very confusing in many ways. Within a few seconds you have no idea if the people next to you are the same people and who's where. Have you ever felt disoriented like that spiritually or in your life?

Without any direction at all? Just confused? Feeling in the dark? Not knowing where life was or which way to head? Maybe you feel that way today.

Maybe someone you know feels that way. In the midst of that kind of darkness in that cave our guide brought this really powerful LED light.

[23 : 37] Right? And you turn off all the lights and then he cuts that powerful light on and that one clear light all of a sudden makes the path forward clear. You could just follow that one light all the way back.

It shines so brightly gives very clear direction and that's the experience God describes for his people in Isaiah 9 isn't it? People walking in darkness seeing a great light.

Those who are confused without a plan uncertain how to move forward perhaps at times fretting was there any hope of moving forward? They receive wisdom divine direction a clear and hopeful way forward.

If you're disoriented or confused in the dark this morning might you consider experiencing Jesus as your wonderful counselor? Laying hold of him yet again in a way you haven't for a long time or maybe for the first time open his word and ask him to guide you talk to someone you know who is following him and ask them to help you get reoriented pray that God would give you light in the midst of your darkness Christian could you honestly say to a friend that Jesus is that light in your moments of darkness?

Could you cite some specific real life examples where he has been and is that for you or is Jesus just theoretical in your life?

[25 : 14] Think of things in the past think of things in the present how is Jesus that for you now? Because many of us have had that experience of finding light and life in Jesus when we didn't know where to look when we were at our wits end when we'd come to the end of ourselves and found light and life in him but maybe for many of us it's been a while since we found ourselves actually in that position of being confused and completely without a plan has it been a while for you since you felt that way?

When we were there in that cave in Cathedral Caverns we were on a tour with a group made up of many young people and so there was a large group that had gathered around and the guide said alright turn all the lights off and every young person in the group did what?

Yeah turn the cell phone on Oh yeah I'm gonna be the one with the light and so everyone and they one at a time and he'd tell them to turn it off and somebody else would turn one on little faint screens of light that showed up little soft lights that distracted from the experience of total darkness and one really bright light maybe you acknowledge that you need some direction in life but you

know where to find it you've got a phone how am I gonna navigate this next season of life? How will I deal with the evils in the world around me? How will I reach a decision in this crucial area of life? You know what I got this I got a phone I've got my go-to people there's a really wise politician that I'm hoping will bail us out maybe he's got great ideas like King Ahaz in Isaiah's day some really good plans and you think this is where Israel can stake all their hopes this is where God's people are finally gonna find rescue but while he seems to have some wisdom he's not like the divine wonderful counselor maybe for you it's a great religious teacher or leader you say I always read what he or she has to say I trust whatever he said maybe it's a blog or a pop celebrity that you say I always follow and after I read her I just feel good about the direction of my life again it just kind of re-centers me listen we do this if I haven't hit on the way you do it we do this just a few years ago

Americans spent in one year eleven billion dollars on the self-help industry self-improvement books CDs seminars coaching stress management programs eleven billion dollars and estimates are that that's increasing every year we want a plan don't we a wise direction a solution to me to my life hope for moving forward and we say things like I'm praying about it I'm just trying to take some time and pray about it but in actuality often we're planning strategizing and worrying about it in actuality we're pulling our phones out not praying we're saying I'll figure out I'll find a light here there's a way forward I know there's something I've got this looking for wisdom in the world when God says he will make foolish the wisdom of the world because

[28 : 57] Jesus himself becomes our wisdom 1st Corinthians chapter 1 do you know Jesus and the wisdom he gives through his word and spirit but you found yourself saying things like I'll follow Jesus I will that's important after my plans are achieved after my college years are fully enjoyed or after my career is settled or after we get through this stage of life with the kids Jesus is coming I've got plans for now and I've got to get through them and I'll follow Jesus when I get through I'll find his plans later maybe you've said things like you know my situation is just unique Jesus in his word don't say anything to this decision I'm unique I just have to do what's best for me he'd never understand my situation maybe you've said you know Jesus and his priorities just don't apply in this area of my life they only have to do with church stuff and it's it's really nice to hear about and talk about then but not with the rest of my life

Jesus says seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these other things will be added to you as well sermon on the mount you want wise counsel he says God's kingdom first he says your priorities are out of whack you're looking for direction in the wrong places and for Jesus to be your wonderful counselor means coming to Jesus first means submitting your plans to his word means laying down what you desire in order to be passionate about what he desires for your zeal to match his zeal for his kingdom he's calling you to experience him as the wonderful counselor for you as the one who guides you perfectly who directs your paths straight who always leads you to fullness of life even when it doesn't feel like it because your priorities have changed you trust him that's what it means to experience to taste him as it were as your wonderful counselor and listen last thing this is the glory of the gospel the beauty of Jesus as wonderful counselor is this when he gives you the wise plan for your life he doesn't ask you to go anywhere he hasn't already gone does he but we think oh no all the self-denial involved in that all the sacrifice that's going to demand of me when Jesus asks you to lay down your way or your very life it's because he's already laid his down for you he says over and over in the gospels

I've come to do the will of my father not my will but his will be done I choose to lay down my life for the sheep because he does that Jesus doesn't merely show the way to abundant life he actually is the way the way the truth the life Jesus doesn't merely point to the door to the father and say over there get to him through that he is the door to the father Jesus doesn't merely shine light into the darkness like a guide with a flashlight he is the light the light of the world who gives life to every man whoever follows him will not walk in darkness but have the light of life the wonderful counsel you get from Jesus is not merely all the right things to do in order to get back on the right path but he says follow me believe in me find your life in me

I am the wonderful counselor is he your wonderful counselor today let's pray father I confess that I would rather feel wise myself than trust your wisdom I would rather figure out where life is found than be told I would rather be the one with the solution than the one with the questions thank you that you come and offer yourself as our solution thank you that we don't actually find life in ourselves thank you for the those moments where we've found a dead end and an emptiness trying

to do things our own way thank you for showing us Jesus as not just one who gives light but one who is light that we don't have to try to figure things out we can just throw ourselves on him would you give us the humility the desperation the sense of our own need enough that we would trust him and that we'd find great joy in following him our wonderful counselor it's in his name we pray amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org you