

The Dawn from on High

Messianic Prophecy from Isaiah to Bethlehem

SESSION 1: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Isaiah 9:1-7 | Week of the First Sunday of Advent

PART 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that Isaiah's oracle of the great light names the territory that fell first to Assyria, Zebulun and Naphtali, and that Matthew shows Jesus beginning his Galilean ministry in that same territory. The promise is not vague optimism. It has an address, and God kept it.

Catholic Touchstone

The coming of God's Son was prepared over centuries (CCC 522), and the Church relives that long expectancy every Advent (CCC 524). This study reads the Old Testament the way the Church does: the New lies hidden in the Old, and the Old is unveiled in the New (CCC 129).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The setting is roughly 735 to 732 BC, during the crisis scholars call the Syro-Ephraimite war. The northern kingdom of Israel and its ally Syria tried to strong-arm Judah into an anti-Assyrian coalition. King Ahaz of Judah panicked and called on Assyria itself for help (2 Kings 16:7-9). Assyria came, and it did break the immediate coalition: Damascus fell and Rezin was killed. But the rescuer became the overlord. Tiglath-pileser annexed great stretches of the north in 733 to 732 BC, and about a decade later, under his successors, Samaria fell and the northern kingdom ended (722/721 BC). Among the first territories devastated and annexed were the Galilean lands: the group will find this for themselves in 2 Kings 15:29, which names Galilee and all the land of Naphtali (with Gilead and a list of towns) among the territories Tiglath-pileser captured, carrying the people into exile. Isaiah 9:1 is what adds Zebulun alongside Naphtali; the historical reconstruction that both tribal lands fell in the same Assyrian annexation is well grounded but is a reconstruction, so say so if asked.

That is the darkness of Isaiah 9:1-2. It is not a mood. It is a map: real villages under occupation, families deported, lamps out. Into precisely that geography Isaiah speaks a promise: the land brought into contempt will be made glorious, and the people walking in that darkness will see a great light. (Isaiah 9:1 contrasts former contempt with latter glory for that region; the pairing of "first to fall, first to see the light" is the canonical shape the group will find when Matthew begins there, not a clause Isaiah himself writes.)

The oracle then explains the light, and here is the shock of the passage. The answer to Assyria is not a bigger army. It is a birth: "to us a child is born." The child carries four titles, read by Christians as names of the child, each one a sentence of theology: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Scholars differ over whether these function as throne names in the ancient royal style, as a single sentence-name, or as titles describing God's action; the Church reads them in their fuller messianic sense. You need not raise this unless someone does.) And his reign rests "upon the throne of David," which sends us back to God's covenant oath to David in 2 Samuel 7 that his house and kingdom would be made sure for ever.

Hold the two halves of the session together for the group: the darkness is specific, and so is the dawn. When Matthew reaches for this oracle in Matthew 4:12-16, he is not decorating. He is testifying that when Jesus made Capernaum his base, the light stood up in the same territory where the dark had fallen first.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Isaiah 9 does not float free. Its taproot is the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7:12-16, where God promises David a son, a house, and a throne established for ever. Every messianic hope in this study grows from that oath. Isaiah 9:7 takes up its covenant vocabulary: throne of David, his kingdom, for evermore, and then adds the guarantee that carries the whole season: "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." Not Israel's effort. God's own jealous love.

The fulfillment text is Matthew 4:12-16. Notice what Matthew does: he keeps the tribal geography of Isaiah 9:1 and the darkness-and-light saying of 9:2, wraps them in a fulfillment formula, and adapts the wording as he goes (Isaiah's people "walked" in darkness; Matthew's "sat" in the region and shadow of death; Isaiah's "has light shined" becomes "has dawned"). Do not tell the group that Matthew changes a future promise into a past fact: both verses are already in completed-action form in your Bibles, and a leader who says otherwise will be corrected by anyone with the page open. (For your own interest: Hebrew prophecy often speaks of the certain future in a completed form, the so-called prophetic perfect. That belongs in your head, not in the session.) Keep the word dawned in your pocket. The study's title comes from Zechariah's canticle, which blesses God for the day that "shall dawn upon us from on high" (Luke 1:78). The group will meet that canticle again in the weeks ahead.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine

"The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New." This one sentence is the method of our whole study. Augustine is not saying the Old Testament is a code to be cracked and discarded; he is saying the two Testaments are one plan of God, and each lights up the other. This session is Augustine's sentence in action: Isaiah hides Christmas, and Matthew unveils Isaiah.

Quaestiones in Heptateuchum 2.73, as quoted in CCC 129

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Jerome

Jerome, who spent decades in Bethlehem translating the Scriptures, says in substance in the prologue to his Isaiah commentary that Isaiah deserves to be called an evangelist rather than merely a prophet, because he sets out the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that he seems to be narrating what has already happened rather than foretelling what is to come. (The familiar English phrasing varies between translations, so this is given as summary rather than quotation.) When your group opens Matthew and hears Isaiah's own words, they will feel exactly what Jerome meant.

Prologue to his Commentary on Isaiah

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Henry Newman

"Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on!" Newman wrote these lines in 1833 after a nearly fatal fever in Sicily, on the ship home, becalmed in the Mediterranean, unsure of his future. They belong in this session because they pray Isaiah 9:2 from the inside: the honest voice of a person still in the dark, asking for one step of light. Advent gives everyone in your group permission to pray from that place.

The Pillar of the Cloud (the hymn Lead, Kindly Light), 1833

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 129: the unity of the two Testaments, with Augustine's dictum. CCC 522: the coming of God's Son is an event so immense that God willed to prepare for it over centuries, making the promise heard and the expectation grow. CCC 524: in celebrating Advent each year, the Church makes that ancient expectancy of the Messiah present, and shares in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming. CCC 712: the Catechism itself points to Isaiah 6-12, the "Book of Emmanuel," as the place where the features of the awaited Messiah begin to come into view. Our first four sessions live inside or alongside that very section of Isaiah.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Do not reveal these to the group

THE NAMES OF THE CHILD. Tonight plants four names (Isaiah 9:6). Session 3 adds a fifth, Emmanuel. Session 5 harvests them all at the manger, where the child finally receives the name Jesus. When the four names come up tonight, let the group marvel; do not connect the dots forward.

THE DAWN. Tonight: light promised (Isaiah 9:2) and light dawned (Matthew 4:16). This thread resolves in Session 5 with Zechariah's "dawn from on high" and Simeon's "light for revelation to the Gentiles." If someone asks why the study is called The Dawn from on High, smile and say the study will answer that by Christmas.

SEALED GUESS. Take-Home 1 carries the write-in box: "What was Israel actually waiting for?" Participants write an answer this week, seal it, and bring it back. Collect the sealed guesses at Session 2 and keep them; they open at Session 3, where Isaiah 7 will make the question harder and stranger than it sounds tonight. Do not discuss answers before then.

SESSION GOALS

1. Ground Isaiah 9:1-7 in its real history: Assyria, Ahaz, and the fall of the Galilean territories (2 Kings 15:29).
2. Let the group discover, on their own, that Matthew 4:12-16 places the start of Jesus' Galilean ministry in that same geography.
3. Sit with the strangeness of the four titles, especially "Mighty God" spoken of a human child.
4. Present the Hezekiah reading of the oracle at full strength, then press it against the text's own scope.
5. Send everyone home with the memory verse, the first Live It practice, and the sealed guess to write.

TIMED PLAN (90 MINUTES)

0:00 Opening prayer and Win questions (15 min). 0:15 Read Isaiah 9:1-7; Questions 1-3 with Discovery A (30 min). 0:45 Question 4 with the steelman chain (15 min). 1:00 Discovery B: Matthew 4:12-16; Question 5 (15 min). 1:15 Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer, distribute Take-Home 1 (15 min).

CUTS FOR A 60-MINUTE EVENING: use one Win question instead of two; assign the Dig Deeper box as home reading; compress Question 2 into the leader's summary sentence after Question 1. Do not cut Discovery B or the steelman: they are the session's spine.

MIXED-AGES NOTE: this study assumes a parish room, not a campus room: grandparents, parents, teens, and children old enough to sit with a Bible. Both Win questions work for a nine-year-old and a ninety-year-old. During the readings, assign verses to younger readers. When the four names are read in Question 4, consider having four different voices read one name each, slowly. Depth is in the questions, not the vocabulary; do not talk down to the room, and do not leave the children behind.

SESSION 1: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

PART 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Father, your people walked in darkness, and you promised them a great light. As Advent begins, gather everything in us that is dark, our worries, our waiting, our tiredness, and let your light dawn there first. Open the Scriptures to us tonight, and open us to the Scriptures. We ask this through Christ our Lord. All: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

WIN

W1. Tell about a time you had to wait a long time for something good. What did the waiting itself feel like?

W2. Where do you notice darkness in the world, or in your own week, right now? (Any answer is welcome, from the news to a hard homework season.)

BUILD

Read Isaiah 9:1-7 aloud. Use two readers: one for verses 1-3, one for verses 4-7. Invite the group to listen for every word about darkness and light.

1. What words about darkness and light did you hear? Who exactly is "walking in darkness" here, and what has happened to them? (Look closely at verse 1: two tribal names are given.)

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Verse 1 names the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, tribal territories in Galilee, in the far north of Israel. Verse 2 calls their people "the people who walked in darkness... in a land of deep darkness." Something has been done to this land: it was "brought into contempt." The darkness in this passage is not a feeling. It is a specific place under a specific catastrophe, which the next discovery will uncover.

LIVE DISCOVERY A

Say: "Zebulun and Naphtali. Something happened to those lands in Isaiah's own lifetime. Find 2 Kings 15:29 and tell us what it was." Give the group time to find it and read it aloud themselves.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

2 Kings 15:29 reports that Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, captured a list of northern towns and regions, including Gilead, Galilee and all the land of Naphtali, and deported the people to Assyria. (The verse names Naphtali; Zebulun comes from Isaiah 9:1, and historians place both tribal lands in the same Assyrian annexation.) These Galilean territories went down early, well before Samaria and the end of the northern kingdom. Isaiah is preaching to the first casualties of the Assyrian age. When he says "darkness," his hearers could name the villages.

2. In verses 2-5, what does God promise to do about this darkness? Notice the three pictures in verses 4-5.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Light will shine exactly on those who sit in deep darkness (v. 2), and joy will multiply like harvest joy (v. 3). Then come the three pictures of liberation. First, the gear of oppression broken: the yoke, the staff across the shoulder, the oppressor's rod (v. 4). Second, the manner of the victory: "as on the day of Midian" (v. 4), recalling Gideon in Judges 7, where God cut the army down to three hundred men so that Israel could not claim the win as its own. Third, the aftermath: the soldier's boots and blood-soaked uniforms burned as fuel (v. 5), because the war is so completely over that the gear is only good for the fire. The promise is not survival in the dark. It is the end of the dark.

3. All of that raises the question: how? Verse 6 gives the answer, and it is not what anyone expected. What is it, and what surprises you about it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The answer to an empire is a baby. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder." Not a coalition, not a weapon, not a warrior in his prime: a child, given as a gift ("to us... given"), on whose small shoulder the whole government rests. God's answer to the darkness begins as the most vulnerable thing in the world. Let the group sit with how strange that is; this study will not let go of that strangeness until Christmas.

4. Read the four throne names in verse 6 again, slowly, one at a time: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Which one startles you most, and why? What is each name claiming about this child?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Each name is a claim. Wonderful Counselor: his wisdom is a wonder, a word the Old Testament uses of God's own marvelous deeds. Mighty God: the startling one. *El Gibbor*, and in Isaiah 10:21 the same title is used of the LORD himself. Everlasting Father: not confusing the child with God the Father, but naming him the fatherly, everlasting protector of his people. Prince of Peace: his reign is marked by *shalom*, wholeness and right order, and the very next verse joins that peace to a government and a Davidic throne without end. Together the names say this child rules the way only God can rule.

STEELMAN: BUILD, THEN PRESS

BUILD (present this at full strength before answering): "Isn't this about a king of Isaiah's own generation? Isaiah is speaking in the 730s BC. Ahaz's son Hezekiah belongs to exactly this moment, and he will be a genuinely good king; many interpreters tie this oracle to his birth or his accession, or to the ideal Davidic ruler the court celebrated at an enthronement. Ancient royal language was extravagant and could sound divine: Psalm 45:6 addresses a Davidic king with the words 'Your divine throne endures for ever and ever.' Titles compounded with God's name were ordinary in the ancient Near East and need not claim the king is God; they can proclaim what God does through him. On this reading Isaiah 9 is a royal oracle for Isaiah's own century, and Christians are reading Christmas back into it." Let the group feel the strength of this: it takes the history seriously, and Hezekiah was real. One caution for you: his sole reign is usually dated around 715 BC, two decades after this crisis, so do not phrase the objection as though he were about to be crowned. The strong form is about royal ideology, not the calendar.

PRESS (answer from the text): Ask the group to test the reading against three facts. First, verse 7: "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end... from this time forth and for evermore." Any Davidic king could be honored with large language, but this oracle sets no horizon at all, and no reign of that century came near it: Hezekiah died, and Assyria stripped his kingdom back to Jerusalem's walls. The point is not that he had nothing to do with the oracle. It is that he cannot exhaust it. Second, verse 1: the oracle promises glory for the northern tribal lands specifically, and no king of Judah restored Galilee. Third, the weight of the titles. Grant the objection its due: royal language could be extravagant, and theophoric names were common. Then notice that Isaiah does not merely give the child a name compounded with God's; he calls him *El Gibbor*, and one chapter later (10:21) he uses that same title of the LORD himself, in a passage about the remnant returning to God. A prophet who uses a phrase of God on one page is not using it loosely of a man on the next. The Catholic reading does not deny that the oracle spoke into Isaiah's own moment or that a good king stood near its horizon; it insists the oracle's own words overflow every merely human king, and waits for the one they fit.

LIVE DISCOVERY B

Say: "So the oracle waits. More than seven centuries pass. Then someone picks up this passage and pins it to a map. Find Matthew 4:12-16 and read what happens, and where." Let the group find it and hear their own voices make the connection.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Matthew reports that Jesus, at the start of his Galilean ministry, left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum, "in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali," precisely so that Isaiah's words might be fulfilled, and then Matthew takes up our passage. The territory first devastated by the empire is the territory where Matthew shows the messianic light appearing. And notice how he handles Isaiah's words: he keeps the tribal names exactly, he wraps them in a fulfillment formula, and he renders the last image as light having "dawned." The promise had an address, and God kept it, more than seven centuries later, in a lakeside fishing town.

5. Why Galilee? What does it tell us about God that the light is shown dawning in the place that went dark first?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

This is the pattern the Church hears all through the fulfillment: God does not begin with the capital, the strong, or the safe, but with the place that was broken first. The territory that took the first blow is the territory where the light is shown rising. That shape will hold all the way to Bethlehem, a small town, a poor family, an occupied land. Invite the group to hear it personally, as an invitation rather than a guarantee: this passage gives us reason to bring our most wounded places to God, and reason to believe that no darkness lies beyond the reach of his light. Be careful not to promise anyone a timetable for their own healing; the text promises the light, not the schedule.

Dig Deeper

For groups that want more

Court language or confession? Compare Psalm 45:6, exalted address to a Davidic king, with Isaiah 10:21, where "Mighty God" (*El Gibbor*) is the LORD. Isaiah knew exactly how strong his words were. Also compare the birth announcement formula of Isaiah 9:6 with the angel's words the group will meet in Session 4 (keep the reference to yourself for now).

SEND

S1. Where in your own life does light need to dawn this Advent? Name it as concretely as you dare.

S2. Who around you is sitting in a dark place right now? What is one way you could carry light there before we meet again?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Each evening, when the first Advent candle is lit (at home or in your imagination), say Isaiah 9:2 aloud from memory. One candle, one verse, every day.
2. One morning this week, pray Zechariah's canticle, the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79), slowly. Underline every word about light and dawn.
3. Do the one thing you named in the second Send question. Small counts. Light usually starts small.
4. Write your sealed guess on the Take-Home sheet, seal it, and bring it back next week.

MEMORY VERSE

"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." (Isaiah 9:2)

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, light of the world, you dawned first where the darkness fell first. We give you the dark places we named tonight. Reign there, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. All: The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

SESSION 1: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

PART 3: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE USED, IN ORDER

Isaiah 9:1-7: the session text, read aloud by two readers.

2 Kings 15:29: Live Discovery A, the fall of Zebulun and Naphtali to Tiglath-pileser.

Judges 7 (background for "the day of Midian," Isaiah 9:4): Gideon's victory; mention only, no reading required.

Psalms 45:6: steelman, exalted court address to a Davidic king.

Isaiah 10:21: steelman press and Dig Deeper, "Mighty God" used of the LORD.

2 Samuel 7:12-16: leader background, the Davidic covenant beneath Isaiah 9:7.

Matthew 4:12-16: Live Discovery B, the fulfillment text.

Luke 1:68-79: Live It This Week, the Benedictus.

Luke 2:32: leader-only thread background (Simeon's "light for revelation to the Gentiles," quoted in Thread Watch).

Isaiah 9:2: memory verse.

ANSWERS AT A GLANCE

Q1: Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee, a land "brought into contempt." Q2: three pictures, the broken yoke and rod, the Midian-pattern victory, the war gear burned. Q3: a child, born and given, government on his shoulder. Q4: four titles claiming divine-scale rule; steelman is the royal-oracle reading (often tied to Hezekiah), pressed by 9:7's "no end... for evermore," the Galilee geography, and *El Gibbor* used of the LORD at 10:21. Q5: the pattern of a God who begins where the blow fell first.

IF YOU ARE RUNNING LONG

Pre-chosen cut order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper box, sent home instead, (3) Question 2, folded into one leader sentence after Question 1. Never cut Discovery B or the steelman chain; they carry the session.

LOGISTICS

Collect nothing tonight. Distribute Take-Home 1 as people leave; it carries the sealed guess box ("What was Israel actually waiting for?"). Collect sealed guesses at Session 2. They open at Session 3.