WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

Isaiah 9:1–7

Key Verse: 9:6

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

What gift are you hoping for? There’s the famous Christmas song, “All I Want For Christmas Is You.” Material things can’t really satisfy us; having a person in our lives can be so much better, right? Yet even the gift of a lovely person with a bow on top may not really fulfill us. In today’s passage God promises to give us the most special person, the one who truly meets all our needs. No matter what we’ve been through, he gives us light, joy and peace. He has four amazing names, but the one we want to think most about is “Wonderful Counselor.” What does it mean? Why do we need him? How does he help us? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verse 1a. Who were those who were “in distress”? It refers back to 8:19–22. God’s people were the ones in distress, partly because they were suffering hardships, but mainly because they’d stopped listening to God. When life became difficult, they didn’t consult God through his word but sought advice from mediums and spiritists, people who try to contact the dead to find out what to do. Likewise, today there’s all kinds of human wisdom people talk about and look to for guidance. Frankly, most of it is useless. We have the best wisdom available to us in God and in his word of instruction to us in the Bible. When we’re struggling, we should inquire of God and really seek him through his word. Otherwise, our distress and darkness will only get worse.

Read verse 1a again. God doesn’t want to leave his people in gloom and distress. Though he disciplines us for our sins, he really wants to help us get out of our gloom and distress. To help us understand this about God, the author turns to an important historical experience. Look at verse 1b. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob’s sons who became founders of two of the 12 tribes of Israel; their lands were in Northern Israel. It says God humbled these lands. How so? He sent the Assyrian Empire to invade them, and people were deported to Assyria (2Ki15:29). It was so humiliating. But the next part of the verse says, “…but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan…” It’s the same place as the land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali. But instead of permanent humiliation, in the future God would honor these places. How so? Read verse 2. God would honor them by enabling them to see “a great light.” What’s Isaiah talking about here? He’s predicting the coming of Jesus. The Gospel writer Matthew quotes these words from Isaiah 9 to describe how our Lord Jesus began his ministry in Galilee (Mt4:13–16). God would honor these humiliated people by sending the great light Jesus there, of all places. God still loves to show people his grace, though we really don’t deserve it. Though we may be walking and living in deep darkness, God never gives up hope on us. We can see the great light of Jesus and get out of all our darkness if only we repent and turn back to him from our hearts.

Isaiah goes on to describe how God would restore his people. Read verse 3. God’s people were so afraid of dwindling in number until they would be no more. They were afraid of having no blessing of God on their harvest, and of being plundered by others. But God would increase their numbers, bless their harvest and actually make them victors. The words “joy” and “rejoice” are repeated here. God’s discipline made his people distressed, but God’s grace would totally restore their joy until they forgot all about their former misery.

Look at verse 4a. “The day of Midian’s defeat” refers to a famous Bible story. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his later wife Keturah (Ge25:1,2). Their land became known as “Midian,” a mountainous region in northwest Saudi Arabia, on the east coast of the Gulf of Aqaba. When Moses fled from Egypt, he went to live there for 40 years. During the times of the Judges the Midianites oppressed Israel for seven years (Jdg6:1–6). But God called his servant Gideon to save his people (Jdg6:11–32). That one day was so important in God’s history. Do you know the story? Gideon had 32,000 men in his army. But God didn’t want his people to think they’d won the battle on their own, so he told Gideon to get rid of the fearful men, and 22,000 left, while 10,000 remained. God thought there were still too many, so he had Gideon give them a test. When he led them to water, most of them got down on their knees to drink. Only 300 men used their hands to cup the water and lap it up like dogs so that they could keep watch for the enemy. Those 300 were the only ones allowed to fight with Gideon. The Midianites had joined forces with nearby peoples; their numbers were as thick as locusts, and their camels were as numerous as the sand on the seashore. In contrast the 300 Israelite soldiers looked pitiful; they were divided into three groups and given trumpets and empty jars with torches inside. During the night they went to the Midianite camp, blew their trumpets, smashed the jars and shouted, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!” The Midianites ran, crying out as they fled, turned on each other with their swords, and God gave Israel a great victory that day (Jdg7:1–25). This event forever reminds God’s people that God himself is the one who fights for us, if we depend only on him. The best counsel we can have in the most hopeless situation is to remain spiritually alert and depend on God to fight for us.

Read verse 4. The Assyrian emperors loved to brag how they put heavy yokes on their captives and beat them down mercilessly. But God would shatter the Assyrians just as he shattered the Midianites. Later Isaiah prophesies that overnight God would send his angel and put to death 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, and their king would flee home and be murdered by his own two sons (14:25; 37:36–38). In the same way God can defeat any oppressor today, whether human or spiritual. Read verse 5. This tells us how God wll put an end even to all warfare. There will be no more need for warriors’ boots or garments (cf. 2:4). It’s a prophecy not only for Israel but for all God’s people for all time.

How can God’s people restore their joy, and all oppression and warfare in this world finally cease? Read verse 6a. This is a most famous prophecy of the birth of Jesus our Messiah. It fulfills Isaiah’s earlier prophecy of the virgin birth of a child who would be called “Immanuel”—God with us (7:14). But here Isaiah helps us know him better. He says that “the government will be on his shoulders.” It means Jesus is the one who carries the responsibility for leading God’s precious people. As we saw last week, King Ahaz, when he led his people, only made them more fearful and insecure; his clever plan to rely on Assyria backfired badly and brought his people great suffering. In contrast to him, when this child takes responsibility to lead, he brings his people great light, joy and peace.

How so? Read verse 6b. We find four names for Jesus here. Each name is so powerful and profound. But the first one may be the one we need the most. How can Jesus be our “Wonderful Counselor”? 11:2 says, “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD…” In his prophecies Isaiah often mentions human wisdom. The proud king of Assyria boasted that he was successful because of his wisdom and understanding (10:13). People get misled by their own wisdom and knowledge to think that they are self-sufficient (47:10). Before God, the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish (29:14). God is our source of wisdom, understanding and knowledge. Isaiah 28:29 says, “All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, whose plan is wonderful, whose wisdom is magnificent.” It’s amazing! Human wisdom comes nowhere close to God’s (Isa55:8,9).

Jesus, full of the Spirit of the LORD, is our Wonderful Counselor. Why do we need him as our Counselor? Often people are too proud to get counseling because it means admitting they have issues and need help. But when we’ve lived through suffering or trauma, we need a counselor to help us work through it and understand how it affected us. Human counselors help us see ourselves more objectively, but their help is limited. It’s hard through them to find any real answers or solutions. But Jesus our Wonderful Counselor helps us to see from God’s point of view. He helps us to stop blaming others and feeling like a victim, and to start to see our own sin and what we need to repent of. He also helps us see God’s great love, his great forgiveness and his great hope for us, despite all our sin. With his wonderful counsel he helps us find God’s truth and God’s way for us to go in. Without experiencing his wonderful counsel, we live with our old unresolved issues and keep repeating our same bad choices and burdening the people around us. Without our Wonderful Counselor Jesus we’re really lost. But when we come to him and open our hearts, we experience deep inner healing and find his wisdom to know which way to go. This holiday season may we spend time with Jesus our Wonderful Counselor and experience freshly his healing and his wisdom. May God use each of us in the new year to bring wandering young people to our Lord Jesus their Wonderful Counselor.

The second name of Jesus here is “Mighty God.” It means he’s the one we can turn to, to truly help us (10:21). Because he is Mighty God, his power doesn’t disappoint. He’s our champion and mighty warrior who fights for us and defeats our enemies—specifically the power of sin and the devil (42:13). In him we have nothing and no one to fear. In Jesus the Mighty God we have true victory.

His third name is “Everlasting Father.” Sometimes dads can be annoying, or worse. But the image of a good father is beautiful. A good father not only procreates, but also provides for and protects, and especially loves his children unconditionally. Yet a human father won’t be there forever. But Jesus is our “Everlasting Father.” He’s our true security who loves us with an everlasting love.

His fourth name is “Prince of Peace.” This seems to be the climax of his names. When we get to know Jesus as our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God and Everlasting Father, then we have true peace in our souls. Modern times have been called “The Age of Anxiety” (W.H. Auden, 1947). Even prosperous people are so anxious. Despite all the connectedness of social media, people are still so lonely. Many even have severe panic attacks. All around the world people are desperately seeking substance and identity in this increasingly disorienting industrialized world. Just as inner peace is elusive, so is peace among humans. All around the world people are fighting all kinds of battles and wars. Many fight against each other on a much smaller scale, sometimes even within families. How can we sinners possibly have peace? We first need to experience peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Ro5:1). We need to experience how Jesus was punished on the cross for all our sins, so that we might know his peace (53:5). When we trust in him, our minds are steadfast and he keeps us in perfect peace (26:3). In Jesus our Prince of Peace we also can forgive others deeply from our hearts. This Christmas may we experience Jesus as our Prince of Peace. May his birth bring light, joy and peace to each one of you, to your families, to our nation, and to all the suffering people around the world.