

¹⁹When 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? ²⁰To the law and to the testimony! If people do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them. ²¹They 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, ²²and 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.

¹Nevertheless, 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.

²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

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

³You 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.

⁴For 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.

January and February are my least favorite months of the year, and I’m sure I’m not the only one that feels that way. These months are cold, there’s not a lot going on to celebrate, and though the days are getting longer, it’s still pitch-black by six o’clock every night. Of all of those things, it’s probably the darkness that gets to me the most. Is it the same for you? People don’t like darkness. It’s unhealthy. It’s depressing. And there’s a lot of evil that happens under the cover of darkness. Isaiah contrasts darkness with light in the first reading for today, as he shows how pervasive the darkness of life really is, but that there is a light that shines through it all.

Certainly, spiritual darkness is deep. Everybody has struggles in life. Even those people who look like they have it all together are hiding worries and regrets behind the curtain. Look around. People are hurting. People feel like their lives are in pieces. What’s hurting you? Maybe your heart is focused on a loved one who is going through some difficulty in their life. Maybe something is wrong with you and no matter how hard you try, you can’t seem to fix it.

Isaiah points to the solutions that the world offers: “Consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter.” In the days of Isaiah, people sought truth and peace through witchcraft, a sort of spiritualism that was outside of God. Now, we probably don’t seek the aid of mediums, but we do look for peace in the silliest places. I’ll be honest, I don’t read the local newspaper too often. Usually when I do, it’s to skim the obituary section to make sure none of our members went home without letting me know. But one article that has caught my eye a few times is the Dear Abby column. If you’re not familiar, it’s a national column where people write in seeking advice for their life’s problems. What has struck me the few times I’ve read it is how often the writer’s advice is contrary to what God’s word teaches, often encouraging people to be more selfish. And yet, millions of people read this column every week, millions of people who are fed advice that will keep them in darkness.

People seek comfort in their life through the physical things of this world, like chasing after wealth or self-medication. But there's no amount of money or alcohol to give you a peaceful life. There is, however, enough to destroy your life ten times over.

Some look for solutions by imitating successful people. They think if they live like a celebrity, they will have a good life just like the rich and famous. But do celebrities have good lives? Tom Brady is the most accomplished quarterback in NFL history and an incredible amount of people idolize him. But in the last year, Tom Brady has lost \$100 million in an investing scam and was so unable to quit football and stay home with his family that his wife divorced him. Musicians and actors go crazy before our eyes, getting into drugs and weird cults, falling from public spotlight and destroying their lives. You can imitate people, but they're never going to get you where you want to go.

There are some even, that don't look for solutions outside of themselves. Instead, they put their trust in their own will. They think if they always trust their gut, it will never steer them wrong. I hear people talking about how spiritual they are, that they have some special relationship where God communicates his will to them in their emotions or their thoughts. But seeking guidance from inside instead of from the external word of God is a trap. The voice that tells you to follow what your heart desires could very well be Satan's. The thought that your needs are more important than those around you is certainly of the sinful nature.

How are these solutions working out for you? Maybe we should pause to look at ourselves before we laugh at the Israelites looking for hope in the arms of mediums. Isaiah tells us what we already know about these worldly solutions by trial and error: "If people do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them." The Israelites turned their backs on God. They chased after the foreign gods of their neighbors. That didn't help. They felt like if they could just get through the storm they were facing, there were calm waters on the other side. But one storm rolled right into the next. How often are we too seeking peace outside of what God says?

God tells us we should only expect life to get worse when we depend on these things: "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, 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."

When you turn away from the word, you turn away from the Savior. And when you turn away from the Savior, that's when true darkness swallows your life. This darkness is a cycle. The darkness in your life bothers you enough to find something to depend on, often something that is not God. Depending on that thing brings even more darkness. Over and over it goes, as we buy into what we think will bring us light, only to see it cast us into even darker despair. We know it because we've felt it: the depression, the anger, and the worry. How can this cycle be broken?

There is only one place true hope can be found. Isaiah writes, "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for the land that was in anguish." The end of darkness is here. Why? Listen to the prophet: "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." This season of Epiphany focuses on Jesus being revealed to the world that desperately needs him. Here he's shown as the light God promised through Isaiah and even before that. And Isaiah describes what his dawning does. It's like the joy at harvest time, as the farmers can finally take a breath after laboring in the fields. It's like the celebration that comes when the wealth is being divided. Both of these show that hardship is behind us. And that's one of the best feelings you can have, that something is complete. Isaiah also compares the dawning of

Christ to a yoke being removed or the whipping rod being held back. Christ's coming signals that there is no more pressure to follow the right plan in order to find joy or depend on the right advice.

All the things you wanted from the wrong sources – that you looked in the wrong places to find – are what Jesus actually delivers. That happy marriage that you want isn't built on maintaining your physical attraction or making sure that you have enough money to live in the big house and go on the fancy vacations. It's built on the back of the perfect marriage between Christ and his church. Husbands and wives love each other even in the lean times because they know the love that Jesus had for them first. That fulfilling job you desire doesn't make you feel whole because you're always doing what you love, but because you know who gave you the strength and ability to do it and who you are pleasing with every hour you're on the clock. The ability to leave the past behind is not because you yourself have conquered temptation, but because you've heard the soothing words of forgiveness from the only one who is able to truly forgive.

If you want to shake off the gloom in your life, don't look to the pithy life slogans you find on Instagram or to the people that write New York Times best-selling self-empowerment books. Don't even look to your own thoughts. All of these things will perpetuate what you're already going through. Instead, look to the light of the world, entering into it to banish the darkness. The hope that Jesus assures you of is so much more than what the world has to offer. He relieves you of your worry and sorrow. He steals from you your ability to continue to beat yourself up for your sins of the past. Your light has dawned. Don't go back into the darkness.

The devil, the world, and the sinful flesh will certainly try to pull you back into darkness. You'll continue to be tempted to handle the problems in your life on your own. You'll be convinced that you don't have enough time to go to God's word as you deal with what plagues you, so you should just go forward with whatever you feel is best for you. As sinful people, there is a danger that all of us face to put God's word on the back shelf, prioritizing sleep over worship or free time over Bible class. To rest in the truth that Jesus brings us light is to continue to be reminded of it by being in the word.

You have been brought out of darkness into light. But as you know, there are many who are still in darkness. We all know people who are down in the dumps because they have no hope. Their lives are a mess, and they see no way forward. We look down on these people at times, yet they are much wiser than the rest of the unbelieving world. These people in despair have come to the recognition that the cloud of darkness will not and cannot be removed by them. They need someone to bring them light. That light comes only from Jesus, and he shines that light on the world through you.

The people of God are not a gloomy people. They're not gloomy, because they know the work of salvation is already done. There's a reason Hollywood casts Christians as the hopeful optimists. It's the reason the early Christian church was criticized as insane, while Christians sang hymns in the midst of being devoured by lions. While our lives might not always be happy, they're always full of joy. And the cause of that joy – Christ's resurrection guaranteeing us resurrection too – can never be taken away. That joy rubs off on people. They want the peace you have. So, God makes you a lighthouse to shine his light into your world. Give them that peace that shines from your rooftop. Point them to the word of God, which shows their Savior from sin. Spread the news, that one-by-one people would be rescued out of darkness. Yes, it's dark outside this time of year. But the light of Christ shines through it all. Amen.