

ISAIAH 8:19—9:2. (EHV)

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

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.

If you have a question to which you don’t know the answer, what is your go-to source for finding the answer? Or if someone else asks you a question and you don’t know the answer, where do you tend to point them?

Of course, that depends on the information you or the other person are looking for, right? For many trivia kinds of questions, Google is probably the go-to source for many. But Google won’t give you the answer to everything. If the question is, “What exactly is in this hot dish?”, Siri on your iPhone is going to be clueless. You need to ask the cook. If the question is, “Where are the fish biting today?” you can’t buy the Amazon Echo and ask Alexa for the answer. You need to ask a local fisherman or fishing guide. “Why is there no water coming out of my faucet?” “Why is my chain saw making a rattling noise?” “Why won’t my cough go away?” These are questions that smart devices can give you some options for, but not the definitive answer that a plumber, a machinist, or a doctor can probably give.

But what about life’s most important questions? What about questions of right and wrong? What about questions of life and death? What about the invisible and intangible realities of life? What about the future? What about absolute truth? What is your go-to source for the answers to those questions?

The people of Israel were neck-deep in idolatry, if not deeper. They didn’t want to hear what the true God had to say about their injustice, their materialism, and their greed. In Chapter 5, God says through Isaiah, “Woe to you who join house to house, who connect field to field, until there is no room left, except room for you alone to live in the middle of the land! ... Woe to those who rise up early in the morning to chase after beer, who stay up late into the night until wine inflames them. ... Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight! Woe to those who are champions at drinking wine and heroes at mixing drinks, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice for the innocent!”

They didn’t want to hear what God had to say about any of that. But if man doesn’t want the real God, he needs a false god, an idol, to take his place. He still wants answers to life’s most important questions. So some continued bringing sacrifices to the Lord at the temple purely out

of mindless habit and superstition, hoping that God would still remain on their side in exchange for their works. Others adopted the gods of other nations and set up golden or silver images of those gods in their homes that they then prayed to. But the false worshippers at the temple didn't actually want to listen to God's answers to their most important questions, and the worshippers of false gods couldn't actually ask their lifeless idol statues any questions. So Isaiah tells us here that many of them, to get the answers to life's most important questions, went to consult mediums and spiritists.

A medium is a necromancer, someone who consults the realm of the dead for an answer to an inquiry. The English word *medium* refers both to the fact that the person claims to be a in-between person between the living inquirer and the realm of the dead, but it also refers to the fact that the person claims to be the actual medium or means through which the dead spirit or spirits make contact with the living inquirer. This kind of medium claims to act as a sort of ventriloquist, opening his or her own mouth to speak, but a spirit from the realm of the dead is the one actually doing the talking.

A spiritist is similar. It might be better here, instead of using the word *spiritist*, to use the word *familiar*. It is someone who claims to have a spirit from the realm of the dead accompanying or attending him or her, familiar to him or her. That spirit might take the form of an animal, a bird, or some other form. A spiritist can thus easily contact this spirit for answers to certain questions—allegedly.

Isaiah describes the work of these soothsayers as whispering and muttering. The Hebrew word translated as *whispering* is also used for the chirping and peeping of birds. He is referring to the strange altering of the medium or spiritist's voice as the spirit or spirits from the realm of the dead supposedly take over them to give the inquirer the answer to his questions.

But, Isaiah asks, "shouldn't a people consult their God?" If there is a being who created them, a being who rescued and redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, a being who promised to redeem them from sin and death through the Seed of the Woman, a being who actually made his wise law crystal clear to them, a being who actually controls all and actually has the answers to life's deepest questions—doesn't it make more sense to consult *him*? Yes, isn't it actually an insult *not* to consult him?

And not only that, but does it make any sense to consult the dead on behalf of the living? How can the dead do anything in the interest of the living? Aren't life's deepest questions related to trying to avoid and escape death? How then does it make any sense to consult those who themselves have succumbed to death for answers pertaining to life?

This is the folly of King Saul, who after the Spirit of God left him, snuck out at night and risked the welfare of his entire army by crossing over the valley in which the enemy army was camped so that he could consult the witch of Endor. And what assurance did he get from his consultation? Only the assurance that God indeed had left him and that he and his sons would die the next day (1 Samuel 28).

This is what Isaiah says will happen to all those who look for answers to life's most important questions anywhere other than with the God who created and redeemed them. "They will pass through the land, distress 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 bring anguish. They will be banished into thick darkness.”

Doesn't this description sum up perfectly those who have forsaken the counsel of God? They live in anger and in fear of the future, they have a doom and gloom outlook on life, and when things don't go the way they think they should, they shake their fist at the sky and curse their King and God whom they are ignoring, and they blame the world's misfortunes and their personal misfortunes on him and his disciples, instead of putting the blame where it belongs.

And is this the way we want to live? Do we want to consult the created rather than the Creator for the answers to life's most important questions—the internet, scientists, professors, psychologists, celebrities, politicians, actors, singers and songwriters, and the like? Do we want to consult the dead and the lifeless for answers to benefit the living—through tarot cards, horoscopes, witchcraft, and superstitions? Apparently that's becoming more popular. Netflix is currently advertising their 2026 lineup of shows and movies with a tarot-card-themed campaign, titled, “What's next?” Do we want the distress and darkness and fearful gloom that will result from consulting the dead?

God says, “To the law and to the testimony! If people do not speak according to this word, there will be no dawn for them.” “The law” here is not used in the sense of the law as opposed to the gospel. Quite the opposite. The Hebrew word translated as “law” literally means *instruction*. Here, as often in the Old Testament, it is simply a synonym for God's word as revealed through God's chosen writers. More specifically, earlier in this chapter, Isaiah has just used both “the law” and “the testimony” to refer in particular to instruction and testimony about Christ. As the apostle Paul says, in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Only in God's word, and especially in the message about Christ, are the answers to life's most important questions found.

This is where the prophets and apostles constantly direct us. And Isaiah says, if we do not follow their directions and go to the law and to the testimony, there will be no dawn for us. We will be shrouded in the darkness of night with no hope of a new day, no real hope for the future.

But when we do go to the law and to the testimony, then we do have hope and dawn and light and life: “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 Gnetiles. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. For those living the land of the shadow of death, the light has dawned.”

To those who would say, “Well, there is no light of dawn anyway. There are no firm answers to life's most important questions. There is no absolute truth,” Isaiah replies, “O yes there is.” In fact, the light of dawn, the bright Morning Star is so bright that such a hope of dawn exists even for those who live among the Gentiles, for those who once looked for answers among the dead.

In our Gospel we heard Matthew tell us in whom this prophecy is fulfilled (Matthew 4:12–23). It is fulfilled in Christ. Christ is the Light of the world. He gives light where there is darkness; he gives knowledge where there is ignorance and confusion. Christ is the answer to life's most important questions.

Questions of right and wrong? Christ answers them in his Word, teaching not only what our actions should be, but also telling us that pure actions can only come from pure hearts and pure thoughts.

Questions of life and death? Christ answers them in his Word, not only telling us what will happen to all people after this life is over, either going to dwell with God in heaven or being banished from God to the fire prepared for the devil and his angels, but also how we get on the road that leads to eternal life. Since he himself is the Way and the Truth and the Life, and no one comes to the Father except through him, he invites us simply to believe that his holy life is our life, his all-atoning death is our death, and his resurrection is the guarantee of ours. He even answers difficult questions like, “Why was this believer or that believer taken from us so soon?” with answers like those right here in Isaiah: “The righteous one perishes, but no one takes it to heart. Men of mercy are being taken away, but no one understands that the righteous one is being spared from evil. He will enter into peace. They will rest on their beds. He is walking in his uprightness” (57:1–2).

What about the invisible and intangible realities of life? Christ tells us in his Word that there is a constant battle being waged between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between him and his heavenly hosts and the devil and his demons. He also tells us that from time to time he intervenes in the natural order of things to perform unnatural things, which we call miracles. Ultimately, he tells us that he has all the forces of nature and all the spiritual forces under his complete control.

What about the future? Christ tells us in his Word that in this world we will have trouble, but he also tells us to take heart because he has overcome the world. He tells us that he will rescue us from every evil attack and will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

What about absolute truth? Christ says it’s right here in his Word: “Sanctify them by the truth,” he prayed to his Father. “Your word is truth.” All the laws and rules and theories of science and mathematics have exceptions and can be broken and overturned. Only the word of the Lord remains unbroken into eternity.

To the law and to the testimony, brothers and sisters! Don’t get your light and your truth from any other source. You won’t find light and truth anywhere else, and only the light and truth of Jesus gives us sure confidence and hope here and hereafter. Get your answers to life’s most important questions not from the dead and the lifeless, or from those who soon will be. Get them from the One who is Life itself. Amen.