

Hope Dawns

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[0 : 00] Perhaps very familiar words to us, perhaps words that make us sing Handel's Messiah, at least in our own heads. But let's hear these wonderful words once again.

Isaiah chapter 9, beginning at verse 1. In fact, let's read chapter 8, verse 22, and then into chapter 9.

Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles by the way of the sea along the Jordan.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy. They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.

[1 : 08] For as in the day of Midian's defeat you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle, and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

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.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

However, the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Amen. And before we turn back to that, let's pray for God to help us as we study his word together.

Lord, we thank you for your precious word. We thank you that it's a true word, that it's a powerful and life-giving word. It is a word that contains the hope of salvation for us.

[2 : 31] And so we pray that you would help us to hear from you this evening. We pray that you would speak to us from your word. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So let's think about the dawning of light as we find it here in Isaiah chapter 9.

Christmas, I guess, as we were driving home this morning, the boys were noticing the number of houses where the Christmas trees are up already. Walking up here in the dark, gloomy evening. It's nice for us, isn't it, to see the lights shining. For us, Christmas lights and Christmas season go hand in hand.

In the bleak midwinter, it seems like one of the things that we do culturally is we fight against the darkness by trying to create that cozy and warm atmosphere.

[3 : 33] But I wonder if, for many of us, we appreciate why we do that. I wonder if this is one of those occasions where the tradition came in for Christian reasons and then it's just become part of our cultural tradition that we do lights at Christmas.

Maybe this is one of the ways where we can speak the Christian message to people by using the symbolism of light, which is rich and powerful and we find throughout the Bible.

You know, we come to a familiar passage like Isaiah 9. Many people hear it read and sung at Christmas. And it gives us this rich symbolism connected to light for us to hold on to.

It gives us good news as we consider the arrival of Jesus. Because here is this image given to a people who are in darkness and distress in a time of gloom.

Nationally, morally, spiritually, light is going to break into the darkness, they're told, to signal that signals the coming of Jesus, God's Savior, the child of promise.

[4 : 47] Here is the hope of the light of God's love and grace breaking into the darkness of our human condition. And so the lights that we see everywhere give us a great opportunity to speak of the hope that comes with Jesus.

So let's think about that together. Let's think about the dawning of hope as we find it, first of all, in verses 1 and 2. This section is sometimes described as Isaiah's poem of hope.

And it comes set against the backdrop of chapters 1 to 8. We read verse 22, which gives us a flavor of what's come before.

Isaiah is largely, there are messages of hope and grace, but largely speaking a word of judgment against God's people. That they have wandered away from God.

They've been mixing true religion with false religion. And part of Isaiah's job is to tell the people that because of that, they're going to go into exile.

[5 : 55] And so there's this picture of distress and darkness. But then chapter 9 begins with God's nevertheless. God's word of grace and mercy.

And we get this poem, this prophecy that's written as if it had already happened. When you read it, it sounds as if it's events that have already happened.

This deliverance, this hope has already come. But it hasn't yet. But that's the thing with biblical prophecy. When the word of the Lord comes through a prophet, because God never breaks his promise.

Because God always keeps his word. There is that cast iron guarantee that goes with it. And so Isaiah, with the eyes of faith, can see God's loving purpose.

Can see light that's going to penetrate the darkness. And so there is this dominant image of light that dawns to end the darkness. Now I'm going to guess that I'm not the only one that finds this time of year difficult.

[7 : 02] Difficult to get out of bed in the morning. Difficult to motivate yourself in the evening to do anything because it's dark and it's cold. We look forward already to the prospect of, it's not too long till the shortest day.

And then we begin to inch back. Towards spring. So I've got a while to go. But we have that anticipation. We want the light to dawn.

We appreciate the light. And so this is the image that's given to us here. First of all in verse 1, it's specifically for a particular region.

There will be no more gloom for those who are in distress in the past. He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future, he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles by the way of the sea along the Jordan.

Hope is dawning in particular in the first instance for the northern regions of Israel. This is important because the Assyrian army had come down and they'd begun to attack and take territory and wreak destruction on the north of Israel.

[8 : 10] So that's already started as Isaiah gets this word that he brings to the people. So here is, even as they're watching the beginnings of national disaster, here is the promise of restoration for the people of God.

And then we see wonderfully, don't we, in the New Testament how this is fulfilled. Matthew chapter 4, as Jesus begins his public ministry in this region, Matthew says it's to fulfil this promise.

God keeps his promise and he keeps his promise by sending Jesus, the one who brings hope and restoration. It's interesting too to see that there's specific attention being drawn on the honour that will come to Galilee of the Gentiles.

Again, a reminder, as we thought this morning, that the hope that Jesus brings will be universal.

This isn't just for the Jewish people. This isn't just for national Israel.

This is for the Gentiles. This is for the world. It's a reminder that Jesus is saviour for anyone and for everyone who will trust in him. Then in verse 2, we read these words.

[9 : 21] Now we've probably had the experience, maybe from childhood, finding the darkness to be unsettling.

Perhaps you find yourself in a strange city at night. It's dimly lit. You're not sure where you're going. There's anxiety that can creep in in those moments.

Darkness can sometimes signal fear and danger for us. Darkness is a powerful image in the Bible. This is more than simply a physical darkness.

Darkness here is an image of the moral and spiritual darkness going on in and among God's people.

So here he is speaking to those in Isaiah's own day, saying spiritually you're in the dark. Morally, you are walking in darkness.

[10 : 30] And again, that's something that we very much see ourselves. We see and we experience evil. We recognize that there is injustice in our world.

There is a concert happening in a couple of weeks to raise awareness and to raise funds for the International Justice Mission, which is seeking to end human slavery and trafficking, a reminder that injustice is still present.

Modern technology gives us access like never before to the depths of human suffering and tragedy that there is. There is also the moral and spiritual darkness of people living their lives without any awareness of God at all, thinking that they don't need God because they've got stuff and they've got security in people and things and position.

So we understand this image of darkness, a darkness that casts its shadow over individuals and families and communities.

Beyond that, we are also as people in the dark in the sense that we know that there's a problem. We know that all is not well in the world, but we find ourselves individually and collectively unable to find a lasting solution.

[12 : 01] We discover that as much as we want to hope in ourselves, we do not have it in us to bring peace and joy and life and love. No matter how much governments pour into education or into technology, we discover that these things by themselves do not lead to the kind of society that we would want to see, the kind of world that we all want.

We are in the dark as to how to fix what we recognize is broken. There was a famous speech given by the first president of the Czech Republic, a man by the name of Vaclav Havel, who had seen communism, who'd seen the Nazi regime, and he was the first president of the democratic Czech Republic.

And he said in that speech, a pursuit of the good life will not help humanity save itself, nor is democracy enough.

A turning to and seeking of God is needed. Havel was bringing a very realistic message to his own people. You now are going to have access to new wealth.

You're now living in this new democratic society, but it's not going to give you the world that you want and that you need. Ultimately, you need God for that. He understood the reality of darkness.

[13 : 39] Christianity is a very honest religion because it says to us all through the Bible, this darkness is real. And it's not just a darkness that's outside of us.

It's a darkness that lies within us. And because of that, light and help must therefore come from the outside.

And that's why in Jesus there is hope at Christmas, because here is Jesus, the gift from God, who comes from outside of us to become one of us in order to redeem us.

So that just as the functions of light are to give life, and to illuminate what is otherwise in the dark, and to let the beauty shine, so Jesus comes, and he brings true life.

And he shows the answer to our moral and spiritual darkness. And we see in Jesus what true beauty looks like.

[14 : 43] And it's Jesus who says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.

So that's the dawning of hope. And then in the next little section, we can maybe think about the promise of hope in verses 3 to 5. And we'll see that throughout this poem, all the activity belongs to God.

So in verse 2, it's God who sends the great light. In verse 3, it's God who enlarges the nation and increases joy. It's God who gives the harvest.

It's God that supplies the defeat of enemies that brings freedom. Freedom. And so Isaiah is telling the people that what you need is God's promised grace.

Their temptation was always to look to another nation. Let's find somebody powerful and full of resources. They can help us. And Isaiah's message is, no, you need the grace of God.

[15 : 53] You need this powerful God to be for you. That he's always the only true hope for God's people. So in that little section, there's three pictures, distinct pictures of promise.

Let's just look at them briefly. The first, beginning of verse 3, you have enlarged the nation and increased the joy. Increased their joy.

So as the poem goes on, we see the focus is on a child who's going to be born, who's going to give all this hope. In Isaiah, in Isaiah's own life, there's already been a significant birth.

That one of his children, one of Isaiah's children, was to stand as a lesson to the people of Israel. So if you look with me at chapter 7 and verse 3, we'll discover the name of one of Isaiah's sons.

A name that brings a measure of hope. Chapter 7, verse 3, the Lord said to Isaiah, go out, you and your son Shear Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct.

[17:08] And if you look at your footnote, the name Shear Jashub means, a remnant will return. So every time Isaiah is speaking to his son, calling him in for dinner, telling him to get ready, speaking to him in the center of town, the people are hearing, a remnant will return.

A remnant will return. So here's a measure of hope. Isaiah's message, people are going into exile. But his son is called, a remnant will return.

So there's some good news in that, but not as much good news as there is in this promised coming son. Isaiah's son brought hope for a few beyond exile, but this coming one, this child of promise, enlarges the nation and increases their joy.

This promised son brings hope for many, and not just for those within Israel, hope beyond Israel, that others will be brought into the family, the people of God.

This, in a sense, is why we do mission, because our God is in the business of bringing people in. He's in the business of enlarging his family.

[18:29] I don't know if you followed some of the media response to the death of John Chow, you know the chap that went to that remote Indian island, looking to bring the good news that Jesus loved them, and he was killed upon a second contact with them.

Some of the press were outraged by what he was doing, talking about an aggressive pushing of faith, or saying it's arrogant to presume that these people need Christianity.

They have their pure, tribal religion and culture. So what do we think we're doing imposing Christianity on them? Now, whether we agree with all the ways that he went about his mission is one thing, but I think the Bible would say to us, passages like this, and in the whole message of the gospel, that if God has sent his son to bring true hope, to bring this kind of joy, this kind of rejoicing, and if this message is the only means of salvation, if there is only one way to God, and it's through Jesus, then mission makes sense.

That it does make sense to bring the gospel to unreached people groups. That it does make sense to reach out to tribal people, to try and communicate with them, to learn their language, so that we could share the good news of Jesus.

And it does make sense to share the good news of Jesus with thoroughly secular people who think that they have no need of him. Because there is only one way to true joy, the kind of joy that everybody is looking for, and it's found in this promised child.

[20:24] The next image of hope is also in verse 3. It says, They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest.

So bearing in mind, this is written in an agricultural society, no rain equals no food. Who supplies the rain? It's God who supplies the rain as a gift of his mercy.

Harvest was a cause of thanksgiving because it meant life. It meant hope for the season to come. And then there's the other image of freedom and peace from one's enemies.

They rejoice before you as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you've shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's boot used in battle, every garment rolled in blood, will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. There is no need for the weapons of war because God has secured peace.

[21:34] This section picks up both the language of the Exodus and release from slavery, and also casts the people back in their minds to Gideon, being used by God to defeat the people of Midian in the Judges, Judges 6-8.

And here again is this promise that the coming of this promised son promises a different future.

They will go out as slaves. They will be taken by oppressors into another country, but one who is coming will secure a definitive peace for them.

And again, when we think about the message of the gospel, this is the kind of image that's used in the New Testament. The image of battle.

Jesus comes to go to war against the forces of darkness. There is so much demonic activity around the time of Jesus because here are the forces of evil waging war against Jesus, the Son of God. So Jesus goes into battle against the forces of evil, against our bitter enemies. Our sin that leads us to death.

[22 : 55] Jesus goes to the cross in order to win a decisive victory for us. Through his self-giving love, freedom is secured for us.

Peace with God is secured for us. Peace in our own hearts because we know we're not condemned is secured for us because of this coming child and the light that dawns when he comes.

So these three pictures of hope are all a gift of God's grace. They're all a promise of spiritual reality. So as we come into the Advent season, let's ask ourselves the question, where does my hope truly lie?

Is my heart fixed on, settled on Jesus as the true source of joy and life for me?

[23 : 56] It is an irony, I guess, that this season, which ought to be all about Jesus, can be that time when we find ourselves most distracted and stressed out because of all the stuff that there is to do.

Perhaps the most unsettled. Let's use it as a time for renewal, for fresh worship and appreciation of what God has done for us in Jesus.

That takes us to verses 6 and 7 and our description of this child of hope. Now, I don't know if you saw, I guess that was a couple of weeks ago, a story about a five-year-old Chinese boy and his CV that his parents wrote for him.

It kind of went viral because this boy at the age of five has got a 16-page CV, which is the envy of probably most of us.

Apparently, he reads 500 English books a year. I like to read. I don't think I can do that in a decade. He has memorized, apparently, 100 poems.

[25 : 12] But he's not just a book guy, he also loves sports. And, according to his parents, he's a really tough man. And he never cries at hospital. This kid is remarkable.

You know, it's, you read it and it's like, that's really funny. And then you think, you know, that's really incredibly sad, isn't it? The pressure that that child is going to live under. All of that stuff, which I'm guessing is largely fictitious just to try and get into school.

But you think about the weight of expectation that's being placed on tiny shoulders. What child could possibly live up to that kind of standard, that kind of hope?

Then we come to Isaiah 9. We understand, that's nothing. What that Chinese parents are asking of their kid, that's nothing compared to the expectations of the child of promise here in Isaiah 9.

There is one coming. There is a child, we are told, who will bring light to a world that is marked by darkness. There is a child coming who will bring lasting joy and hope and peace.

[26 : 19] And so we need to ask ourselves, what kind of child can bear up to these kind of expectations? What kind of child is going to be able to bear that kind of load on their shoulders?

If we ask our own children to do that, they would be absolutely crushed by that. If we expect our kids to be everything to us, that's a weight of expectation they can't possibly manage.

Who is this child then? Verse 6 supplies our answer. For to us, a child is born.

To us, a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And he'll be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Here's the answer. Who's this child that can bear the expectations? Only the God-man. Only Jesus, our Lord, the one who is born, as we're told in verse 6, the one who becomes fully human, but the one who is also given.

[27 : 28] God's Son given to us as a gift of grace. And he is the one who can carry God's government, God's rule, on his shoulders. Unlike the kings of Israel, we thought about this this morning, who fail, fail to obey, fail to honor and worship, fail to lead the people towards God.

This great king will do that. And this king, he can lift the burdens off our shoulders. He can carry his own and he can lift ours as well. There is nothing in our lives that Jesus, our king and our savior, cannot handle.

Our disappointments, our fears, our anxieties, our tears. We can lay them on Jesus. He invites us to lay them on him and to find rest because he can carry our burdens.

And he can do that because of his character. He is the wonderful counselor. He is the supernatural, divine counselor who gives supernatural wisdom, who comes to us as the wisdom of God. He is the mighty God. He's not just a spiritual guru. He's not just a great figure of the past, a great teacher, a worker of mighty deeds.

[28 : 42] He is the mighty God. In chapter 10 and verse 21, that same title is used of the Lord God here as a reminder that Jesus is God the Son.

He is our Emmanuel. He is God with us. He is too the everlasting Father. Now that is not referring to the Trinity.

That's not saying Jesus the Son and the Father are one. He is the everlasting Father in the sense that he is the agent of creation. He is the Father of us all because he created us.

And also Father was an image used of a good king, a king who would protect and guide and care for and lead the people well. And he is the prince of peace.

He brings peace and he has the authority to give the precious gift of peace to us as well. And we discover in verse 7 this is a spreading peace.

[29 : 46] Of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end. there is this wonderful promise that there is hope for peace within our hearts and in our lives.

Here is the antidote to the fear and the anxiety that we face. We find ourselves wondering if our life amounts to anything. Am I a somebody? Am I worth anything?

And we discover in the gospel that God loves us so much that he sent his own son to purchase us so that we might be children of God. That we might have that dignity and honour placed on us.

When we wonder what can I do with this guilt that means I have no peace and I have sleepless nights, we are reminded to look to Jesus, the one who went to the cross to secure our peace, to deal with that sin that separates us from God, to reconcile us to the Father.

When we feel anxious about the state of the world, is there any hope for the world? Again, the answer lies in Jesus. Jesus, the one who promises that he's coming back to make everything new, including us, including those who put their trust in him.

[31 : 13] Jesus is the answer to what the world wants needs. And so we find here in Isaiah 9 this rich promise.

And it's not just wishful thinking, because we're told at the end of verse 7, God is committed to this. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

God's passionate commitment to his purpose will ensure this is a child who will be strong enough to bear the hopes of the world.

Strong enough to bear the sins of the world and carry them away. Strong enough to bear our hopes. So have we allowed, are we allowing this child king to rule our hearts?

is Jesus the one who we look to to find true light and life and hope? At this time of year and all through the year, it's the question that Isaiah gives us in this wonderful prophecy.