

To Us a Child is Born

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[0 : 00] Let's turn now to Isaiah chapter 9 and verse 6, and the lovely little words, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.

To us a child is born, to us a son is given. Christmas is such a time of contrasts, is it not? There's the warmth of family love and the heat of family arguments.

There's the plenty of presents under the Christmas tree and the poverty of families who live in temporary accommodation and perhaps can't afford to feed their children.

There's the peace of those who say, Merry Christmas to strangers on the street. And there's the terror, as Evans reminded us, of conflicts all around the world.

The greatest of all Christmas contrasts, however, is between man's Christmas problem and God's Christmas answer. Man's Christmas problem and God's Christmas answer.

[1 : 08] This Christmas Eve, from this verse, for a very short while, I want us to look together at this great contrast, recognizing that the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is best seen against the backdrop of the bad news we see in our world today.

We want to see two things. Man's Christmas problem, God's Christmas answer. Man's Christmas problem, first of all. Well, the prophet Isaiah lived 2,700 years ago.

But the problems he faced in his society aren't really so different from the problems we face in ours. If there's one thing we learn, it is that history constantly repeats itself.

Technology moves on. One, we might be able to do things unrecognizable to those to whom Isaiah first wrote these words. But who we are hasn't really changed at all.

We face the same issues. We have the same emotions. And are faced by the same fundamental problems. At the turn of the 20th century, optimists thought that through our scientific advancement, we were just about to enter a new century of enlightenment.

[2 : 31] An earthly utopia, a perfect world where all suffering and pain would disappear. Their optimistic dreams were dashed on the battlegrounds of the Western Front in the First World War.

The 20th century was the deadliest century in all history. A new century of enlightenment, it was not.

Rather, it was a deeper descent into the worst expressions of the human nature. But you see, this is exactly the kind of problem God is answering in the Christmas story of the birth of a child in a stable in Bethlehem.

The greatest need of the people of Isaiah's day was the birth of this child. The greatest need of the people of our day is the birth of this child.

From verses 2 through 5 of this chapter, we have the two problems we face this Christmas pictured for us in really what is quite harrowing detail.

[3 : 38] The problem of darkness and the problem of violence. The problem, first of all, of darkness. Our passage begins in verse 2 with the words, The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined. Here then we have our first problem. Darkness. Darkness.

The people of Isaiah's day were walking in darkness. They lived in a land of deep darkness. Everywhere they turned, it was darkness.

There was no dawn for them. It was as if they were living in a land of perpetual winter with no possibility of spring.

Now, in the context of Isaiah's writing, doubtless the darkness to which he was referring was that of being occupied and threatened by a foreign military power.

[4 : 45] At that time, the nation of Judah, to whom Isaiah is writing, fell victim to one of the fiercest of all the ancient empires, the Assyrians.

They were cruel. They made the lives of those they had conquered a misery by their severe taxation and their oppressive laws.

But for all that we live in a free society and don't have to worry about occupying foreign powers, we live in an age no less dark than that in which Isaiah lived nearly 3,000 years ago.

The darkness may look different, but it's no less dark. Our children are darkened by the pressures they face on social media.

I read a couple of weeks ago a tragic story of a beautiful child in England who had killed herself, having looked at Instagram and Pinterest posts on how to commit suicide.

[5 : 54] Social media, which can be a force for such good, allow bullies into our child's safe spaces. Our children are being forced into what seems to be a vicious and never-ending cycle of shame and self-loathing.

Our schools, which should be safe places of learning and development, are violent places. Our teachers are being physically and emotionally abused every week, never mind other children. There isn't enough capacity in our mental health facilities to keep pace with demand. Nearly a third of people in Scotland are on some kind of medication for poor mental health.

Church attendance in Scotland has never been so low, with less than 50% of Scottish people even identifying as Christian. Hundreds of church buildings have been and will be sold this year to be reused as domestic homes, nightclubs, and climbing walls.

Of the two church buildings which have recently been sold in Canberts Lang, the two Church of Scotland buildings which have recently been sold in Canberts Lang, part of Glasgow I know really, really well, one is now an indoor golf driving range, and the other is a mosque.

[7 : 20] And as Evan alluded to in his prayer, has there ever been a time when trust in our politicians has been at such a low?

There is a lack of integrity from top down. Are there any men and women of principle in Parliament? Or are they all just interested in themselves?

Drug deaths in Scotland are the highest in Europe. Life expectancy in some parts of Glasgow, like Carlton, is the lowest in Europe.

Food bank use is at an all-time high. For many families in Scotland, tomorrow won't be a day of plenty, but a day of poverty.

Aye, for all that were a free society, so we're told, we are just as dark as those to whom Isaiah wrote 3,000 years ago.

[8 : 24] Worse even, for whereas they had a God to whom they could pray and whom they could hope, we in our civilized, advanced society have got rid of God and replaced Him with nothing.

No wonder it's so dark this Christmas in Glasgow. The second problem beyond darkness is violence, from verses 3 through 5.

Violence. In these verses, the prophet Isaiah describes the terrifying conditions under which the people of his day lived. Under occupation, they were ruled with an iron fist.

Their enemy, the Assyrians, were fierce. They were well-organized. They were technologically advanced. They were numerically massive. They were the world's superpower of the day.

Under such conditions, the people had no hope of freedom. The foreign armies had already killed the cream of Judah's young men in battle.

[9 : 30] But now the remaining population was subjected to cruel and burdensome taxation. The yoke on their shoulders.

Their lives had become absolutely miserable. Again, we live as a free nation. There are many other parts of the world today where the conditions under which people are living are similar to those experienced by those to whom Isaiah was writing.

As I said earlier, the 20th century was the deadliest in all history. The 21st shows no sign of slowing down. We live in a violent world where nations build up vast stockpiles of weapons and rain down death from above.

Add to that the constant threat of terrorism and the need for our nation to protect itself. And it's enough to make us paranoid. The sheer violence and destruction and warfare which could be unleashed in our world is beyond our comprehension.

And this is only a tiny fraction of the violence we see every day on our streets and in our society. When are Celtic playing Rangers?

[10:47] This week, isn't it? It's, that's right. Okay, that is one of the busiest days in Glasgow's hospital for stabbings. Can you believe that?

So we have darkness and we have violence. The two major problems which face the people to whom Isaiah was writing nearly 3,000 years ago. Darkness and violence, the two problems which have faced the human race every Christmas season since.

No matter how hard we try to change, no matter how better we try to get, it's always been the same. And no matter how many technological, social, and medical advances we've made, it's still the same.

Darkness and violence are two greatest enemies. Okay, enough depression. God's Christmas answer.

God's Christmas answer. When we take into account the deepest darkness and the most terrifying violence of the human race, it would seem that God's answer could and should have been something pretty dramatic.

[11:58] In other parts of the Bible, we read of mighty angels appearing and destroying armies. Could God not do that to violent nations? In other parts of the Bible, God sends cataclysmic natural disasters to wipe out entire populations.

Could God not do that? We might suppose that God could answer great force with even greater force and darkness with the radiance of a burning star.

God's Christmas answer consists in these words, for to us a child is born, to us a son is given. It would seem such an underwhelming response that God answers the deepest moral, spiritual, and emotional darkness of the human race with the birth of a child.

And that He would answer the terrifying violence of a warlike human race with the gift of a son. Why not do what God did before, back in Genesis 6, and send a devastating natural disaster upon the world?

Why not unleash the mighty armies of heaven? God's responses often seem so underwhelming and inadequate. We talked today about bringing a knife to a gunfight.

[13:18] God's Christmas answer seems no answer at all. A child? Are you kidding me? A child against all the darkness and violence of our nation?

What do we expect the baby to do? Do we expect the baby to cry the enemy in his submission? Sleep the darkness into light?

As we go through the Bible, we often find God's responses to be seemingly underwhelming. To a powerful Pharaoh, God sent an old man called Moses. To a warlike giant, God sent a boy called David.

But in both situations, the seeming weakness of God overwhelmed the strongest of men. If traditions are anything to go by, we should expect the same thing to happen again here.

This child given to us, the son born to us, he lived and died in such humility and obscurity, but behind it all, Jesus was very far from ordinary.

[14:28] The religious authorities laughed at him. The kings of Israel mocked him. The Roman soldiers tortured him.

But all the time, he was very far from ordinary. For we read that this child who was born, upon his shoulders shall be the government, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace, there shall be no end. That child born in such humility and weakness is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

The seemingly underwhelming answer from heaven to the darkness and violence of the human race is actually more than enough.

For this child born is greater than anyone can imagine. On his shoulders rests the government of the universe, and in him is all love and grace and peace.

[15:42] God's Christmas answer to man's Christmas problem is the birth of a child who is Emmanuel, God with us. A child named Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

This child will grow into a man, and that man will suffer in darkness and die on a Roman cross, bearing the worst of violence man can subject him to.

He will die there as the sacrifice for all our sin and all our guilt. He will die there as our Savior and our Lord, and on the third day shall conquer them all, and rise to new and never dying life.

He, the light of the world, in whom there is all glory, born in such humility, will overwhelm and overcome the darkness of the world on the cross.

He, the peace, the peace of the world in whom there is such purpose, will defeat and destroy the violence of the world upon the cross, creating a new kingdom of light and peace through his saving love and grace.

[17 : 03] This is the gospel of God, that the weakness of the cross is the power of salvation to anyone who will believe in Jesus and put their faith and trust in him.

God's Christmas answer to man's Christmas problem is the Jesus born in Bethlehem, crucified outside Jerusalem and raised from the dead from a garden tomb.

Through his death for us, we have forgiveness and hope because in him we're given new hearts in which God replaces darkness with light and replaces violence with peace.

You know, in the darkness of this Christmas Eve outside, our hope isn't in some kind of pagan winter solstice and the revolutions of the earth around the sun.

Our hope is in this child born to us, this son given to us, Jesus Christ. Now is the time for us to receive God's Christmas answer.

[18 : 13] Now is the time for us to put our faith and our trust in Jesus.