

The leader you want

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[0 : 00] That reading can be found on page 691, and we'll be reading through to chapter 9, verse 7.

For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of the people, saying, Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread.

For the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken. They shall be snared and taken. Bind up the testimony. Seal the teaching among my disciples.

I will wait for the Lord who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts who dwells on Mount Zion.

[1 : 22] And when they say to you, inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God?

Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony. If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

They will pass through the land greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God and turn their faces upwards.

And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.

[2 : 24] But in the latter time, he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

And those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you, as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken, as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in the battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder. And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth and forevermore.

[3 : 45] The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. You can find the reading on page 975, and I'll be reading Matthew 4, verses 1 to 17.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting 40 days and 40 nights, he was hungry.

And the tempter came and said to him, If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. But he answered, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, He will command his angels

concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. Jesus said to him, Again it is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. Again the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. [5 : 09] And he said to him, All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me. Then Jesus said to him, Be gone, Satan, For it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee, and leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.

From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. An experiment was conducted a few years ago to study the effect of peer pressure on young people. Ten teenagers were told that their eyesight was being tested. Three cards were held up with three lines of varying lengths. The researchers would point at each line in turn, and the teenagers were instructed to raise their hands when the longest line was pointed to.

[6 : 45] But before the experiment started, nine of the teenagers were told to secretly vote for the second longest line. The experiment was, what would the tenth teenager do?

So the cards were held up. Line C was clearly the longest. But nine hands went up for line B. The tenth teenager looked confused, looked around, but after a brief pause, he raised his hand along with the rest of them.

The instructions were restated, and nine of them voted for the wrong line again. And after a longer pause, the poor guy raised his hand along with the group.

He wasn't alone, though. 75% of young people they tested did the same. They preferred to go along with others rather than stand out from the crowd, even when they knew the crowd was wrong.

Well, it's not just teenagers, is it, who feel the pressure to follow the crowd. If we're honest, living as a Christian, we really feel that temptation to conform.

[7 : 56] Maybe at work, maybe at school, at parties, or family get-togethers. We all feel that pressure to go along with the crowds, to fear the things that other people fear, to trust in the things that they trust in, and have our perspective on the things they look to.

It comes out in what we talk about, what we hope for, what we hope for for our children. Well, Judah is certainly feeling the pressure as we come to Isaiah chapter 8.

They are on a brink of national crisis, of invasion, and in chapter 7, if you hear last week, instead of turning to God, King Ahaz turned to Assyria.

But they are also a nation wallowing in their sins. Earlier on in the summary, in Isaiah chapter 5, we heard that Judah lives for the pleasures of this life, and they've turned away from God and forsaken him.

And so now, God is going to bring his strong rebuke on this nation. He's saying, if you want Assyria, fine. You're going to get it up to your neck. And now, God counsels Isaiah and his followers to live distinctive lives, honoring him throughout this darkness to come.

[9 : 17] It's there in verse 11. Have a look down. For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me and warned me not to walk in the way of this people.

God's strong hand is on Isaiah. He is an urgent warning. Do not follow the crowd. Do not walk in their way. And in this bleak time to come, Isaiah is given two specific instructions of how to live in this nation that has turned from God.

And he's also giving an encouragement as well to hold on to throughout the darkness. So do follow on in the handout on the back of the service sheet. The first thing there, fear God, not anything else. Fear God, not anything else. It's there in verse 12. Have a look down with me. Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy.

And do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. Judah is living in the very real fear of other nations around them.

[10 : 25] They're fearing for their livelihoods, the future. In fact, they're fearing for their very lives. And these fears are not too dissimilar to what we face today.

Each day, each day, we're surrounded by fear. Newspapers and the TV channels proclaim fear to us. Economic fear with Brexit. Physical fear with terror attacks and street crime. The fear of loss or failure in exams. The fear of missing out. Being unrecognized by others at work. What other people think of us.

There are lots of fears in the world. And it's very easy for us to follow the crowds and fearing the same things.

But Isaiah is told not to fear what they fear. Instead, verse 13. The Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy.

[11:25] Let him be your fear. Let him be your dread. Surrounded by a fearful people, God's people too are not without fear but it's directed differently.

Not towards their circumstances but towards God who controls their circumstances. The Lord of hosts, the creator of the universe, the controller of all the armies who wields the power to put the sun in place and bring empires to ruin.

He is the one they should fear. Polycarp was an early church bishop in the Roman Empire and he was persecuted and put on trial for being a Christian.

And here's what he said at his trial. You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and is then extinguished. But you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly.

Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want. He feared God. He feared what was to come more than he feared others which meant he could live this distinctive life and stand up for God.

[12:37] And so God's people are to be distinct in fearing and honoring him as holy. Setting him apart in our hearts above all things. Because what do the fears of this world lead to?

Well, verse 14. God becomes a stumbling block and a snare. Those who don't fear God, well, he will cause them to stumble, fall, and be broken. But those with a right fear of God, well, he will be a sanctuary, an oasis of calm in God's presence.

So there's two ways to live that was a thought about earlier. And judgment and salvation depends on our response to God. He is a sanctuary or a stumbling stone, giving comfort to those who fear him, but causing those who don't fear him to stumble and be broken.

So then for us, well, what are our fears for the year ahead? Maybe being overlooked at work, what others think of us at school perhaps, a change in our circumstances.

Well, instead of being driven by these fears and ending up following the crowds, God calls us to fear him and honor God with our lives. And when we do that, he is our sanctuary.

[14:01] We are in his presence, whatever may happen to us. Binnie Villopolo is an England rugby player. He's a big bruiser, big bruiser of a guy.

And he was recently asked in an interview, do you fear being dropped from the team? And he answered, my faith is my priority, which is why I don't fear being dropped.

If I was, well, then it would mean that God is teaching me a lesson, telling me not to get too far ahead of myself, to be more humble. God's people are to fear God, not anything else.

And his second instruction Isaiah is to follow is this, trust in God's words, not in anything else. Trust in God's words, not in anything else. You see, where are the people of Judah putting their trust for the future?

Where does their security come from? Well, it's verse 19. Have a look. And when they say to you, inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God?

[15:13] Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? They look to mediums and necromancers, people who claim to connect with the dead to foretell future events, find out what's in store for them.

Now, a quick look on Google shows that this spiritualism is still alive and kicking today, or dead and kicking, really. For a large fee, you can speak to Jane Wallace and the psychic sisters in Selfridges. Maybe you know people who follow their horoscopes. I'm old enough to remember Mystic Meg on the national lottery with her crystal ball, telling you if you're going to win.

People do still turn to superstitions and spiritualism for assurances of hope and security in the future. But it's completely absurd, isn't it?

Completely absurd what Judah is asking. They're asking Isaiah and his followers to speak to these mediums to predict the future. How far have they fallen?

[16:18] They are no longer listening to God but to these people. They're no longer listening to the word of the living God spoken through Isaiah. They instead put their trust in other things for the future.

They want to know everything's going to be okay. Well, in 2016, for us, it might not be horoscopes and palm readings that the majority of people put their trust in for the future.

We might pin our hopes on other things. Looking to the governor of the Bank of England or to politicians for assurances of future or our bank balances or our UCAS forms or our career paths, our intellect and abilities.

But Isaiah warns us that it's dangerous to trust in these things above all things. Look down at verse 20. to the teaching and to the testimony.

If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. They will pass through the land greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their gods and turn their faces upwards.

[17:34] They will know, they will look to the earth. But behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish, and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

You see, those who alienate God and put their trust in other things for the future will find nothing but distress and darkness, which will continue forever.

No dawn. Now, the people of Tromsø in Norway in the Arctic Circle certainly know what it's like to live in continuous darkness because from November to January, the sun does not rise at all.

Electricity usage soars as sun cream sales plummet. There is no dawn. And likewise, failure to trust in God leads to continuous darkness under his judgment.

Because putting trust in anything other than God will lead to hunger, anguish, anger, gloom, and darkness. And we see glimpses of that in the world around us.

[18:45] Hunger. Maybe not for food, but for money. Power. Possessions. Status. When hopes are pinned on careers and politicians, then people get angry.

At their circumstances. They feel they should have a better lot in life. And the anger is directed towards the people in power. In Judah, it's directed against the king.

Today, well, maybe politicians. We've seen a fair amount of that recently, haven't we? And anger directed towards God.

Instead of contentment, they find hunger. Instead of peace, find anguish and anger, which leads to darkness away from God.

But instead of following the crowd, Isaiah and his followers are told to trust God's words. Look down at verse 16. Bind up the testimony.

[19:47] Seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob and I will hope in him. Isaiah and his group are guardians of God's teaching.

They are to seal, bind it up, protect God's words and trust in it. Despite the coming darkness, they are to trust God's word, what he has said, his promises.

They will not forsake the promises he made to Abraham, patiently waiting for the light of God's salvation to come. And Isaiah says himself, verse 18, that his children are signs of this.

If you remember, his children are called Maha Shalal Hashbaz, which means quick to the plunder, and Sheer Jeshup, which means a remnant shall remain. And Isaiah himself means Yahweh saves. And at home, when Isaiah calls for Jash and Baz, he is reminded that God will judge, but a remnant shall return. Each time Isaiah hears his own name, he can still find comfort that God saves and he trusts in his promises.

[21:02] You see, there are lots of things that we can put our trust in for the future. And this message of waiting and trusting God for the future is not one that's popular.

Because we see the present as real and the future is uncertain. We often want our lives to improve now. Now is what matters.

And yet God urges his people to follow the crowds. That's what they thought. Instead, to wait for the Lord, hope in him and honour him by living distinctively and trust his word each day, even when our circumstances scream otherwise.

Trust in God's word, not anything else. But living these distinctive lives, not following the crowd, often feels an impossible task.

When you're there at work and everyone's talking about that thing and you really know you shouldn't join in or you're at that party or you're heading off to university and you really know you should

stand out.

[22 : 10] It feels impossible. Those in Judah are being asked not to fear the visible present but the invisible God and to trust the invisible promises of an invisible future.

How on earth can they do that? Well, how on earth can we do that? It looks and feels so weak.

Well, Isaiah gives us that great vision of a glorious hope for God's people.

And that's our last point this morning. Look to the glorious future hope. chapter 9 starts But there will be no gloom for her who is in anguish.

In a former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined. God's faithful people among Judah are to wait through the darkness of God hiding his face in faith and hope of the dawn to come.

[23 : 27] And the vision Isaiah gives for the future is a complete reverse of what came before.

Verse 2 darkness to light. Verse 3 fear to joy.

Verse 4 oppression to freedom. Verse 5 war to peace. For the person who puts their hope and trust in God will a complete reversal take place.

That is what Isaiah and a faithful remnant are holding on to. And when we come to Matthew 4 we find a light does finally dawn. as Jesus came out of the land near Galilee that was the first to experience the gloomy darkness of the Assyrian invasion where they are the first to experience the light of the salvation.

And Jesus proclaimed that glorious light of God's kingdom saying repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. and those great promises of a great reversal will have been fulfilled now.

We can rejoice now that through trust in Jesus' death and resurrection we have been brought out of darkness into the light of God's salvation. When we repent and turn back to God the oppression of the devil has been defeated.

[24 : 50] We have joy now. No longer at war with God. A complete reversal. The people of Tromso in Norway living through months of darkness well they look forward to the light to come knowing that it will come.

And in fact from May to July it does come. The sun never sets in fact in those times. It's a complete reversal. And likewise Jesus brings the complete reversal for his people from darkness to light. He came to fulfill Isaiah 9 and bring people out of darkness. And the great description of him is there in his familiar verses.

Those verses we read every December. But Isaiah 9 is for life not just for Christmas. Have a look down verse 6. For to us a child is born to us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be wonderful counselor mighty God everlasting father prince of peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end and on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness and with this time forth and forevermore the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

[26 : 20] The promise of darkness to light is achieved through Jesus. Jesus who is that wonderful counselor who is supremely wise. Jesus who is the mighty God who comes to earth with the power over sickness over nature over death over sin.

Jesus who is the everlasting father the prince of peace who achieves peace with God for us through his death on the cross. But as God's remnant we're waiting then well we are waiting now for the complete fulfillment of those promises and we know it will happen when Jesus returns.

We know now that Jesus is risen from the dead he is reigning all the governments are under his feet but when he comes we will see Isaiah 9 in all its fullness and until then we fix our eyes solely on that everlasting kingdom of light to come knowing that the promises of God are so sure and never fail.

In fact these promises for God's people here were so sure even written in past tense that's why we know it's worth living distinctive lives for him and so as we come to a close as we go back to school at work and we see our neighbors and friends well how should God's people live?

Well God says not in the ways of this people we all feel the pull to conform to follow the crowd maybe you feel isolated at work or at school living as a Christian maybe you feel the darkness of current circumstances surrounding you and in those times like the remnant of Judah we hold fast to

the promises found in God's word patiently waiting and holding on to those promises of a secure future in God's perfect new creation it is hard standing out from the crowd but having this glorious future hope each day with a right fear of God and complete trust in his words well we like Isaiah can say I will wait for the Lord and I will hope in him let's pray father God we thank you for this great and glorious promise you give us in Isaiah 9 this vision we thank you that Jesus has achieved this that he is now reigning that the government is on his shoulder and father please help us to look forward to when we see this in all its fullness please help us to fear you and not to live in the way of a world that has turned its back on you amen are you it no you no no no no no sin no no no no no it cm put us right yes in there we in