

The Saviour has come - to bring us peace

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[0 : 00] How many movies or books even can you think of which is set in a dystopian world? Do you understand the word dystopian? It's where the ruling powers are oppressive, where evil triumphs and seems to hold sway.

And if there's any human goodness at all, it's only allowed to exist just on the verge of being snuffed out. So, any come to your mind? I'm sure lots.

Particularly those of you who watch lots of movies. I'm sure there are more examples of this, but here are some of mine. And I'm going to have the sort of graphic on the slides.

So, I had, for example, the Hunger Games, where you have a boy and a girl from each district chosen as tribunes. And then they fight each other to death until there's only one left or whatever. And apparently that allows that particular district to get their rewards for the year or something. Is that right? Yeah. Another one is The Matrix. Yeah. Where the world is ruled by sentient machines and all humans are put in a coma.

[1 : 09] And they're actually in pods. And their lives exist only in virtual reality. Although when the movie starts, you don't really realize that until later on. If you're a bit older like me, you might remember The Blade Runner or The Island or Gattaca.

And I suppose you could even put Star Wars and the Harry Potter movies into that category as well. Now, it's a surprisingly popular genre, isn't it?

Because it plays actually to our deepest fears. No one wants to live in a world like that. Where our lives are ruled by fear and we are actually deprived of our freedom.

But of course, this type of world isn't entirely fictional, is it? Because we've seen this in our own world. Like the Holocaust for the Jews in Nazi Germany.

The concentration camps in Communist Russia or even in China. And right now, if you went down to the border of Turkey and Lebanon, there will be camp there millions of Syrian refugees living in this kind of hellish world.

[2 : 23] One which is almost bereft of joy and hope. And that's the sort of world into which Isaiah chapter 9 speaks. This was the world for the people of Judah.

That's the two southern tribes of Israel. Israel who found themselves living in a land of fear and oppression. If you want to sort of understand what's been happening, then look at chapter 7 and 8. There you see that the ten other tribes of Israel, the northern kingdom, had decided to gang up with Syria to attack Judah. Thus we read in chapter 7 and verse 1.

I've got that on the slide. When Ahaz, son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, king Rezin of Aram, that is Syria, and Pekah, son of Ramaliah, king of Israel, that's the northern kingdom, marched up to fight against Jerusalem.

But they could not overpower it. Ahaz, the king of Judah, was told by Isaiah, God's prophet at the time, in verse 4, again on the slide, say to him, the king of Judah, be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid.

[3 : 33] Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram, and of the son of Ramaliah, Aram, Ephraim, and Ramaliah's son, sorry, Ephraim and Ramaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, let us invade Judah, let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.

There's a lot of names in there, but what God is saying to Judah is, don't panic, but put your trust in me, even though you're being attacked. I will defeat them for you.

Later on in verse 8, God says that in 65 years, the northern kingdom will be no more. But as for you, Judah, God says in verse 9, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

And yet, what Judah did was to actually pay Assyria, a kingdom further to the north, to come and attack Syria and the northern kingdom. They thought that if they got the stronger power to attack Syria and the northern kingdom, they'll be fine.

And Assyria gladly obliges, except they don't stop there. But they keep marching south into Judah and Jerusalem as well. And so by the time we get to chapter 8, and verse 22, that's the end of that chapter, both Judah and the northern kingdom find themselves in the situation that is described there.

[5 : 03] It says, Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. And so Israel finds herself in a sort of dystopian world of her own.

But in chapter 9, which is what we read, there is a ray of hope, and there's the promise of a new dawn. So we're going to begin now in verse 1, where it says, Nevertheless, at the turning point, 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 honor Galilee of the nations by the way of the sea beyond the Jordan.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, and on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. So as my outline says in point 1, God is promising salvation.

He is coming to rescue his people, where he will turn their darkness into light and their despair into joy. Now this darkness, of course, is not literal.

[6 : 11] It's moral and existential. And the light, when it comes, will see the lifting of their oppression. Interestingly, the rescue will come from the north, coming first to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, which is also another way of describing Galilee.

And if you're a clue, or if you've read Matthew, you will immediately realize that is where Jesus himself began his ministries when he came centuries later. He was the coming of this light, the coming of this new dawn.

But the north is also where Assyria had come from. So just as oppression swept over the land from the north at one time, so the rescue will, as it were, wash over that oppression.

So the picture I have in my mind is, for example, if somebody accidentally spilled some paint on the footpath and splashed it all over, then what you do after it is splash a bucket of water to wash it away.

That coming of another wave over the original paint. And so it is with God's rescue. The light from God drives out the gloom that has been there before.

[7 : 26] Now I don't know if any of you have ever been awake at the crack of dawn. I know at least one person that does it habitually.

But if you ever wake up at that time and look out the window, the way it works is that you'll see darkness one moment, it's all dark, and then the very next, with the sudden outbreak of light, you see immediately your landscape being illumined.

Dimly at first, and then before you know it, in bright sunshine. And if you happen to be on the beach at the time, a lot of people watch the sunrise at the beach, that sight is spectacular, isn't it?

And that's the picture of joy that Isaiah is prophesying. One moment there's gloom in the land, and then the next, there's this outbreak of joy.

So if you keep reading in verse 3, Isaiah says, You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy. As the light spreads, so does the nation and its joy.

[8 : 32] That's the picture. They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. 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. And so you notice that in verse 4 alone, four times there's a reference to joy or rejoicing.

And this joy is brought about by an outbreak of peace. Not the kind that comes when you have this heavy hand of a dictator that's enforcing peace.

Have you ever seen those? Rather, this is true peace where the people are free and they're joyful, they're spontaneous in their delight.

So Isaiah says that they rejoice at the harvest. Why? Because they get to keep it. As opposed to being taken from them. They rejoice because when they work, it's not because of forced labor, but

because they want to do it.

[9 : 44] They're no longer slaves because the yoke across their shoulders is shattered. Their oppressors are defeated and the boots and the garments that are used in battle are burnt so that they can no longer be used.

Isaiah is really painting a beautiful picture, isn't it, of true peace that results in joy. And it's an idealistic, utopian vision.

And if you care to study the history of civilizations, you discover just how hard it is for this to be achieved. Now we might think that we live in a democracy which is pretty good.

But actually, democracies are exceptions in this world rather than the norm, aren't they? If you look around the world, the majority of the world actually don't live in true democracies.

More often than not, it's the privileged few who are free. They're the ones who wield power and have the wealth to have to do what they like. But even as we look at our democracies, the best of the bunch as it were, they're not perfect too, are they?

[10 : 57] You only have to look at the state of politics in America today, in the UK, even here in Australia at the moment. And you get a sense of it, don't you? People seem to be grumbling all the time about this political gridlock where people that are in power aren't looking after the people that voted for them.

And just over the last few weekends, if you've looked at the news, you've seen the so-called yellow vest protests, haven't you, on the streets of Paris.

The working class are unhappy that the ruling class have increased the fuel taxes again in that country in the name of climate change, but where the burden is falling hardest on those who can't afford it.

But here in Isaiah, God promises Israel a joyous and peaceful nation. Maybe not necessarily a democracy, but one where people enjoy true peace and prosperity.

And so the question is, how will he achieve this? Well, it's described in verses 6 and 7. And so he says, 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.

[12 : 22] Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and holding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. The first encouragement we get is that it is God that will achieve this. It is God's single-minded, unrelenting pursuit of this state or nation of peace that he's on about.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. But then, go back to verse 6, and you'll notice that the names of this child, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

They're actually names for God. They're divine names that describe God's character. Wise in counsel, Everlasting, the Giver of Peace.

And so, God will achieve this through a child who is divine. That's the prophecy. But, notice as well in verse 7 that this child is also human, born as a descendant of David who will reign on his throne and over his kingdom forever.

[13 : 39] Of course, the promise to have a descendant of David on the throne of Israel comes from the prior promise that God has already given to David in 2 Samuel, chapter 7. There, and I've got that on the slide, God had promised David that when your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom.

He's the one who will build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. And again, the mention of offspring takes us back, doesn't it, to last week in Genesis 3 which Devin spoke to where we see the offspring is the one that crushes sin and Satan.

And so, to sum it all up, this passage, what this passage says is that God promises to accomplish a kingdom of increasing joy and peace.

And this kingdom will be ruled by a divine son who is also a descendant of David. And because he's divine, he will rule with justice and righteousness. And for those of us who are Christians, well, we know that this promise is fulfilled in Jesus.

He's the child who is born, who is David's descendant. He's God's son. Come to establish God's kingdom. And over and over, if we read through the Gospels, this is what the Gospel writers are on about, including in the Nativity narratives.

[15:12] And so tonight, I picked one portion of it when we looked at Luke's Gospel in chapter 2. And if you listen carefully, you would hear, wouldn't you, a lot of references to this passage in Isaiah.

So I've got, again, Luke chapter 2 on the overheads. So for example, in verse 10, the angels talk about the good news. And this is of the kind of joy, great joy, that is prophesied by Isaiah.

In verse 11, the child will be born in the city of David, as a descendant of David, as both a savior, but also as lord or ruler, one whose government will increase.

And just before, although we didn't read it, in the first chapter of Luke, Zechariah had prophesied that when this lord comes, he will shine on those living in darkness, verse 78, and in the shadow of death, to guide their feet into the path of peace.

Can you see, over and over again, there's this reference back to Isaiah chapter 9. And then, lo and behold, when Jesus arrives and the angels announce his coming to the shepherds in verse 14, what do they say?

[16:29] They say, glory to God in the highest heavens and on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests. And so, it's very clear, isn't it? There is no doubt that Jesus is this child prophesied in Isaiah.

His will be the kingdom of righteousness and peace. And yet, some of you might be thinking, well, if this is true, and it's now more than 2,000 years after his birth, why is it that we still have not seen this kingdom where peace and righteousness reigns?

Why is it that we can't take a plane, fly to this land, hand in our passport, and say we want to become citizens of this land? Have we missed something or has God failed in his promise?

Is God, for instance, just like the many promises we find on the packaging of Christmas toys? You know the ones where you look at the box and has such glowing promises of that wonderful toy within and then we go and buy it and then we're disappointed once we open it.

It's like the remote control helicopter I bought one year. Pictures on the outside made it look like it was the easiest thing to maneuver with the remote control. That, you know, you could make it hover in mid-air and then as you do, you could shoot those missiles and rockets.

[17:55] I think I've even brought it to church once. I use it as an illustration here. Well, I did buy it only to discover that, you know, when you make it go up, it doesn't hover. It just keeps going up.

And then when you want it to come down, again, it goes all the way and crashes to the ground. And as for hovering in mid-air, well, you can forget about it because all it does is just keep spinning round and round.

And so, you know, where do I shoot the rockets? I don't know. So is this like God promising too much with the birth of Jesus? Where is this promise, kingdom of peace?

Well, look again at verse 14 because the answer lies in understanding exactly what this kind of peace is promised. Have a look at it.

It says, peace is promised to those on whom God's favor rests. In other words, this isn't a universal peace for all mankind. But neither is God playing favorites and only favoring some to be able to find this peace.

[18:59] Rather, this peace is available to all, but the way to receive this favor, well, we find that in Mary's song back in chapter 1 of Luke. There she's saying that God's favor rests on those who fear Him.

Verse 50, and those who are humble before Him. Verse 50, His mercy extends to those who fear Him. Verse 52, He has brought down rulers from His throne, but He has lifted up the humble.

So what is required to find favor with God is to humble ourselves before Him and fear Him. That's all that's required, but it actually requires all from us.

It's hard, isn't it, to put aside our pride and to come fully under the rule of His Son. But when we're willing to do that, then, as Zechariah prophesies a few verses on, God will give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

that is, those who fear God and are humble before Him will find the peace that is promised. But this peace is first and foremost peace that we have not with one another, but peace with God through the forgiveness of sins.

[20 : 20] This knowledge of salvation comes when we hear the good news and respond to it humbly. this is the salvation that we need most of all, forgiveness from the coming judgment of God rather than freedom from human oppression.

And if you think about Israel, the reason why they were living in darkness in the first place was because of exactly that. They had rejected God's authority.

They had refused the word of promise given to them. They had failed to trust Him for their lives and safety. Instead, what they had done was to turn to the powers of the age.

And so, this is true for us as well. The peace that we need most of all in life is peace with God.

Peace that only comes when we humble ourselves and seek His forgiveness and submit ourselves to the rule of His Son Jesus.

But this kingdom of Jesus is not an earthly one as I said before where you can go to and enter physically. Rather, it's a spiritual kingdom.

[21 : 39] Well, the radios have started playing Christmas songs again. I don't know whether you've noticed. Just yesterday, the one that I heard was by John Lennon in the car. In fact, I don't know why, they played it twice in the one day.

I thought that wasn't allowed with radio stations. Do you know the one I'm talking about? You do, David? Which one? Correct. It's called Happy Xmas, War is Over.

And so, this is Christmas. And what have you done? That one. Another year over. A new one. You feel like singing with me, don't you?

But if you know, right at the end, there are these verses and these lines. It says, A very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Let's hope it's a good one without any fear.

Sounds a bit like Isaiah and I, doesn't it? And then sung in harmony with these is the refrain, War is over, if you want it. War is over now. Now, do you know when John and Yoko, I think they did it together, do you know when they actually released this song?

[22 : 43] Any guesses? After Vietnam. After Vietnam. It was in the year that I was born. 1971.

That's right, Dave. And you know what the sobering truth is? That as far as I know, throughout my entire life, what was wished for by this song has never come to pass.

War has not ceased. Even though many wanted to. And it's just not in my lifetime as well, is it? It's every year of human history, there has been war.

There has been human conflict. Lasting peace is just not possible unless we are also at peace with God. Unless we're also subject to the rule of His Son, Jesus.

And yet, I'll bet you that over the next few weeks, you will hear many leaders, and some of them will be Christian, renew their calls for peace in this world.

[23 : 50] And yet, they will neglect to mention the one essential thing, and that is to call people everywhere to humble themselves before God, to respond to the good news of Jesus, to stop their rebellion against God's rule over their lives, forgiveness, and to receive the joy that comes from forgiveness.

They will be urging peace between men, but there will be no talk of peace with God. And they are all well-meaning calls, but sad to say, they are actually misguided and wrong.

A child is born, and a son is given, so that by His sacrifice, we may belong to God's kingdom, and receive His righteousness, and find lasting joy and peace with God.

All the wars in this world, and even the conflicts in our lives, stem from humans seeking to be rulers of their own lives, and making others bend to our will.

And so, if there is anyone here tonight struggling in life, with conflict in relationships, finding no peace and joy, and yet you have not made peace with God through Jesus, then that's the first thing that you need if you're ever going to find peace in your life.

[25 : 14] Come to God humbly, seek His forgiveness, and let His Son rule over you. Then you will know the peace and joy that belongs to His kingdom. You will enjoy God's favor whatever life's challenges bring, and God will direct your path, to direct you along the path of peace, and give you joy.

Now, as for those of us who do belong to Christ, then my prayer is that you will have the courage this year, this Christmas, to proclaim this true meaning of Christmas, and talk about peace with God first, before talking about peace with one another.

Talk about finding peace with God through faith in Jesus. But then, of course, once you've done that and in tandem with this, then let us live in peace as members of Christ's body, and then as far as is

possible, if it's in our control, to pursue peace with others around us.

And so, again, I urge you, if there is any conflict that you are in with your relationships, then may God give us the humility to seek reconciliation. Why?

So that we may be a witness to the Prince of Peace, our ruler, under whose government we sit, who is the ultimate Prince, a giver of peace, and the bringer of joy.

[26 : 46] Let's pray. Father, we do grieve for our world and those who suffer because of human conflicts and wars and oppression.

We know that your Son, Jesus, has already come and has established his kingdom of righteousness and peace by the sacrifice of his life and his blood shed for us.

Please, Lord, help more and more people to see that this is where true joy and peace is to be found in their lives. Bring them into the joy of your salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

peace. Thank you that those of us who have trusted in him enjoy this peace. Give us the courage to proclaim the need for peace with God this Christmas and to be reconciled with those who are in conflict with us.

For the sake of your Son, our ruler, the Prince of Peace. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 47] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.