

A Child Born for Us

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on December the 6th 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Child Born For Us and is from Isaiah chapter 9 verses 1 to 7. Be seated and you may like to turn to page 555 in the pew Bibles to the passage from Isaiah 9. And I'll pray for us.

Almighty God we pray that you'll give us ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to understand your word and obey it for Jesus' sake. Amen. They say that a week in politics is a long time and certainly a week between Isaiah 7 and Isaiah 9 is a long time. Last week we saw that King Ahaz, the king of Judah, part of Israel, was stubbornly trusting in his political alliance with the superpower Assyria. And he kept on refusing the prophet Isaiah's invitation to repent and trust in God. This week we find that Assyria, the nation in whom the king had placed his trust, was now menacing from the north and has already taken part of the northern tribal territory of the land of Israel. And so he's beginning to see an aura of gloom and distress coming over the land of

Israel and Judah. The year is about 733 BC. And the king of Assyria, a man by the extraordinary name of Tiglath-Pilazer III. You'd think if you had a Tiglath-Pilazer you'd stop at one, but there were three at least. Tiglath-Pilazer III, one of the world's great emperors, had already taken over these northern tribes of what's called Galilee and made it part of his own province. In their gloom and distress, the people of Israel failed to turn back to God. Even then they kept stubbornly resisting God and turning elsewhere for their future and their destiny. In the last couple of paragraphs of chapter 8, we read, for example, in verse 19 that they turned to the occult.

Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter. Should not a people consult their gods, the dead, on behalf of the living for teaching and for instruction, Isaiah is mocking.

They're turning to the occult and the dead and mediums and spirits and so on to try and find their destiny and their security. For those who do that, their future is only further gloom and destruction.

[3 : 1 5] So the end of chapter 8 reads, they will pass through the land greatly distressed and hungry. When they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods.

They will turn their faces upward or they'll look to the earth but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.

Despite every invitation and every opportunity and every warning, the people of Israel had failed to turn to God. We ought not be surprised when the people we know fail to turn to God as well. In every age, people love darkness more than light. It is only when God supernaturally works in people's hearts and changes them that people will respond to God with faith and repentance. Here is yet one of many examples in the Bible of people who've received invitations and had many warnings but failed to turn to God. And yet, despite all that, the invitation still stands.

Isaiah invites them in verse 13, but the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy. Let him be your fear and let him be your dread. He goes on in verse 16 to encourage them to bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. That is, to trust the law and the words that God has spoken earlier in Israel's history and through the prophet. Keep it and follow it, he's inviting them to do. In verse 17, he says for himself and his friends, I will wait for the Lord. The invitation is there to others to join him in that.

For those who turn to God, he will be their sanctuary, verse 14 says. But for those who don't, he will be their stumbling block, the place of falling. That's the context of these words of astonishing promise in Isaiah 9. A nation that is under threat. The world superpower is gradually moving further south, has already taken part of the original tribal territory of the land of Israel.

[5 : 37] The nation is in distress and gloom. They see little future. Their so-called great alliance with Assyria now looks very fragile indeed. What will happen? In the former time, chapter 9, verse 1 says, that is, in recent past, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the 12 tribes of Israel. Their tribal territories in the north, around the Sea of Galilee and further west towards the Mediterranean, the very northern borders of the land, really, south of what is modern Lebanon.

That land's brought into contempt because the Assyrians have come and they've claimed it. They've deported Israel's leaders and they've repopulated it with their own people and made it part of their province. But this same land, in the latter time, verse 1 goes on to say, that is, in the time to come, in the future, he will make glorious rather than full of content.

It's described here as the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. Three ways of describing the same territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. The way of the sea was the ancient Hume Highway. From Egypt all the way through Mesopotamia, it would run up the coast of Israel and then turn inland through the Valley of Jezreel, around the Sea of Galilee, and then on to Damascus and on to Mesopotamia and Babylon and so on. That's a way of describing Galilee, the nation, the area to the north of the land. It's called Galilee of the Gentiles or the nations here because they're the people who are living there. The Assyrians, maybe some Syrians as well, are living there. It's no longer Israel's territory.

Notice too that this is not just a reflection on world politics and history. It is a comment about the divine cause. It is God behind it. Notice how it says, in the former time, he, God, brought the land into contempt. It's not just the Assyrians being stronger. It's not a natural or human cause. It is God behind it. He brought it into contempt, but the promise is that the same he, God, will make it glorious in the future. God is the agent of what's going on in this world history. The Bible always recognises that despite all the human causes and effects, God is the one behind the world and its direction and its ups and downs.

Well, no doubt in the morning you're a bit like me, or some of you probably aren't, but turn the light on and you blink and close your eyes again. You can't stand the bright light after a night of darkness and sleep. It takes a while for your eyes to get adjusted to the light.

[8 : 34] For Isaiah, much of his preaching was for people who couldn't stand the light. He would preach God's words and invitation to them, but as we saw two weeks ago in chapter 6, they wouldn't have eyes to see. That is, they'd in effect close their eyes to what was being told them of God. They turn away like we turn away from bright lights when our eyes are not accustomed to it. For the bulk of Isaiah's ministry, that was the sort of people he spoke to, people who would reject his words. But bright light also has the function of helping us to see, and that's its function here in verses 2 and onwards.

The people who walked in darkness not have shied away from the light, but have seen a great light, despite them being in darkness. These are people who see the light. These are people who respond to the light, not by turning away, but by opening their eyes to see what the light shines and exposes.

This promise that follows from this verse is not a promise for each and every person. It is a promise for those who have eyes to see, as we saw two weeks ago in the commission of Isaiah as a prophet. These are people who've seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined. This light is not an abstract light. It's not just getting up on a bright sunny day in the Middle East. This is a personal light. It is clear here throughout Isaiah, indeed throughout the Bible, that this light is God himself, the presence and glory of the Almighty. Later on, towards the end of Isaiah, we have words that many of you will know, arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. That is, the light is the glory of the Lord. It's a personal light. So when Isaiah here is saying, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, he's saying, God himself has shone.

God himself has come. In chapter 8, verse 17, God has hid his face as part of his judgment against these rebellious people. But now, as part of his hope and salvation, God who hid his face has now come and revealed himself in splendid light and glory to the people who can see it. And so certain is Isaiah of this event in the future that he describes it in the past tense. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Not because it's already happened. It's poetic license to say, this is a future event, but so certain is it, I'm describing it as though it's already happened. That's a way that ancient Hebrew could be used. Isaiah is certain of this, and he wants his readers not to think, oh yeah, that'd be great if it did happen, but I doubt that it's ever going to happen. He wants his readers and hearers to know that this will happen and to have confidence in the God who promises this salvation that is about to be described. Well, what is this salvation about? What is this light for? What is it showing these people who can see it? Verse 3 has four features of this light and salvation. Firstly, it talks about multiplying the nation, that is expanding its territory. This is a land, remember, who's just lost two of its tribal territory, a part of its territory in the north. Now it's talking about God's promise being to expand the territory, not only to take that, but over the years since David and Solomon were king, about 150 to 200 years before this, the land had gradually been reduced by the Philistines, maybe the Egyptians, the Syrians, the

Edomites, the Moabites, all the nations round about gradually eating away at the borders. And now the Assyrians have come and taken two tribes worth. God's promise is that the land will be extended and expanded back to the promise made to Abraham, it seems, hundreds and hundreds of years before.

[12 : 54] But secondly, it's a promise of abundant harvest. Verse 3 in the middle says, they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. Chapter 5 tells us that their harvests were fairly meagre. But now God's promise is that they'll have abundance, fruits and crops and plenty of animals and so on, rain presumably to make these things grow, etc, etc. Great promise of the future and prosperity.

And the third part at the end of verse 3 is about military victory, as people exult when dividing plunder. That is when an army goes and fights and wins a victory, they will divide the plunder, the spoils of war will be theirs in certain circumstances. In chapter 8 verse 1 onwards we're told that Israel is being the spoils of war for others, for the Assyrians who've taken their land. Now it will be reversed, tables turned and they themselves will enjoy military victory.

And the fourth feature in this verse, coming through virtually every line, is the theme of joy. Their future will be a joyful future. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy, they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. Five words in just one verse, sorry, four words in just one verse to emphasise that their future light will bring them great joy. Now the thing about all those four things, the expanded territory, the harvest, the military victory and the joy is this, they are all part of the original covenant blessings given by God to Israel in the time of Moses 600 years before. They're not new things. They're all part of what God originally intended for this nation. Large territory, abundant harvests, military victory and security and joy. They are part of God's covenant promise blessings.

So what Isaiah is saying here is that God will be faithful to what he promised hundreds of years ago. Trust him, even in the midst of this distress and gloom and the threat of Assyria from the north, trust God's promises. He can be trusted. But it's also saying something else, not just sit back and let God do it. Because those covenant blessings were promised to an obedient nation.

Deuteronomy 28.1 says that if you obey, then these are the blessings that will follow. They're not just given willy-nilly to anyone. So Isaiah's word is not only an encouragement to trust in God's promise, but it is also an encouragement to obey God's word for the nation of Israel.

[15 : 53] Isaiah is saying in the midst of even bad times, it may look as though God is not with us now, but trust him. He will keep his promises, obey him and his blessings will be yours.

How's God going to bring about this? Three things follow. Notice how verses 4, 5 and 6 each begin with the word for, because that is. This is what God's going to do. Three things. One in verse 4 is to get rid of oppression. For the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken. Past tense again, but it's still a future event. It's saying that the yoke of Assyria, the burden that Assyria is putting you under, God will break. And we know from ancient texts that the Assyrians boasted about the burden and yoke that they placed on their victim nations.

This is using the language of the Assyrians, but showing that God is even stronger. But notice also how the verse finishes, you've broken as of the day of Midian. The day of Midian was a few hundred years before when Gideon was raised up by God, a weakling Gideon, and used by God to bring salvation to God's people. In particular, the area of Israel known as Naphtali and Zebulun, the very area that Assyria has taken here. And the way that Gideon brought that victory was in part through torches of light to scare off the enemy. It's an appropriate reference back. It's giving credence to the promise. It's saying God's done it before. So trust him, he'll do it again. He threw off the yoke of the Midianites. He'll do the same now for the Assyrians. And indeed, some of the language of that verse also probably refers to Egypt's oppression of Israel under Moses. It's saying God is powerful to deal with these enemies. Trust him. The second thing that God's going to do comes in verse 5.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. That is saying all the uniforms, the paraphernalia, and implying, I think, also the weapons of warfare will be destroyed. There will be no more war. God will bring this about. God will bring this salvation about, not by a war to end all wars, but by peace to stifle any future further war.

This is just the same as a promise back in Isaiah 2 we saw several weeks ago, where God's, in the end, will beat down the swords and turn them into plowshares. The implements and armaments of warfare will become weapons of peace and agriculture. And the third thing that God is going to do to bring about this salvation is the most startling and the climax of this passage. A child will come.

[18 : 59] If you were scripting a film of God's great salvation and deliverance against the mighty Assyrians, you would probably cast as your lead character Arnold Schwarzenegger or somebody like him, a Harrison Ford or something, somebody with a bit of muscle and a bit of might and a bit of clout, Tom Hanks or something like that. But no, this is a child. We don't expect a child to be the agent of God's glorious redemption and salvation against the Assyrians and for the world. But God's full of surprises, isn't he?

He always seems to pick things that are weak because they make his own strengths more obvious. Why pick an Arnold Schwarzenegger if he claims all the glory for himself? Pick a child who's got no strength and it is clearly God who is bringing about the salvation and redemption. And so often that's the case.

Gideon, I mentioned before, and several of God's heroes of the Old Testament, and especially Jesus' death on the cross, not least St. Paul in his own weakness and vulnerability, used powerfully by God in order to show, as St. Paul says, God's strength made perfect in weakness. And here is an example of that again.

A child is God's agent of salvation and redemption. Notice an intriguing thing that's said about this child in verse 6. A child has been born. I think again as expecting something in the future, though it uses a past tense. The child is born. That is, it's definitely a human being that's being spoken of. But then it says a son is given. It's not a son born. He's already a son. And he's given by the Father. Now I doubt that Isaiah would have quite understood the implications of these words.

But isn't it extraordinary just how precisely they speak about what Jesus did 730 years later? He was born. He was born. He became a human being. But he was already God's son before that in heaven, in glory. And he was given by God as his son, but born as a child. Extraordinary fulfillment, so many hundreds of years later. In place of a faithless king Ahaz, who failed to trust God's word, God is giving what is clearly a king. And yet, he is never called a king. We're so used to thinking of Jesus, who this is pointing to as the king. But he's not called a king in Isaiah, anywhere in Isaiah.

[21 : 53] It's one of the striking things about this book of prophecy. Apart from the human kings that did exist and were real people like Ahaz, the only king that's ever described is God. Remember back two weeks ago, in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord God enthroned in heaven in glory.

God is the real king. And even though this child who is born is clearly a ruler, clearly has government, it's not kingdom. Why is that? I think perhaps two reasons might stand. One is it's probably a slap in the face against the current kings. This king to come doesn't want to be tainted by their bad kingship.

But also it's directing us to the real king, God. God is the sovereign. God is in control in all things at all times. Well, this child who's born is given four astonishing titles at the end of verse 6. He's a wonderful counsellor, not because he's got a PhD in psychiatry or psychology or anything like that. He doesn't get people to lie on his couch and solve all their problems. This wonderful counsellor is somebody with supernatural godly wisdom. Greater than the unwise Ahaz, who is a fairly foolish man and didn't heed Isaiah's wisdom. Greater than the wisdom of the people who are told in chapter 5 were wise in their own eyes, but that was actually folly. This is a person with God's own wisdom. We'll see that again next week. He's also called Mighty God. One of the most extraordinary statements of the Old Testament, I think, about the one who is to come. There are some scholars who are pretty sceptical about the nature of Jesus and try to reshape that expression. They always fail. It simply and plainly means the child who will be born is God. And a mighty God at that. Full of power and able to save. There is no getting around it that this child who's born is both human and divine. And put the two together doesn't compromise them. It's not as though he's a bit human. He seems to be human, but he's not real. And it's not that he's sort of divine or was slightly divine or had some very sort of strongly divine characteristics, but wasn't really God. He is fully God and fully man without being mixed and compromised.

That's why Isaiah said last week in chapter seven, this child who will be born is called Emmanuel, God with us. And here we see it spelled out in more detail. A child who is God.

He's also called the everlasting father, another strange title to be given. Calling a child father. Some say that the kings sometimes were called father in respect of their care and protection of their nation as their children. But again, it could really be a reference to his divine nature as God, the father, although that's unusual in the Old Testament. He's everlasting as well. Compare that to King Uzziah who died and King Ahaz who's going to die soon. This royal figure will be reigning forever.

[25 : 23] And then finally called the prince of peace. Not just because he'll bring an end to warfare, but because he is peace personified, which will overcome all warfare. And this is not a peace that is like what we see now in Northern Ireland or the Middle East, where people are still jostling for position. Not trusting each other, carefully negotiating. There is a peace in the sense that there's no active warfare or very little now in those two places, but one could hardly say that it's real peace. This peace, this prince of peace is harmony, well-being. It's positive good and reconciliation. That's what's being described here. Verse seven goes on to tell us more about this person.

He will rule on the throne of David, we're told in the middle of the verse. David was the great king, not the second king of Israel in 1000 BC. And he was promised by God, what is that, 200 years before this, 250 years before this, that he would be the father of an everlasting dynasty. There would always be kings in David's line and here's the fulfilment of that. This is an everlasting king who is clearly descended from King David, one of the great kings. Even bad King Ahaz, descended from David, is not going to thwart the promise God made to David. And he'll be a king who'll bring justice and righteousness, unlike what is currently the situation in Israel in Isaiah's day, where we're told in chapter one, justice and righteousness are lacking. The extraordinary thing of verse seven is that this is not just an Israelite king, it's not just a king for the sake of this little nation, it is a king for the world.

His authority will never cease. It will constantly expand, verse seven says. That is, he will be king not only of Jerusalem, Judah, Israel, not only king over the Middle East, but as his authority grows and expands king of the world, king of the universe. This expectation far exceeds other expectations placed on Israel's kings. Even the great kings to follow like Hezekiah and Josiah never even came close to thinking this. This is clearly a remarkable person being anticipated. Clearly it is the final king.

Clearly Isaiah is seeing to the very end of world history as we know it, to God's own king to come and reign forever over the world. But after all, that's what God's original plan was. The reason he set up Israel as his own special people was not to mollycoddle them and to take delight in them, but so that they would be the agent of the blessing for the world. That's what he promised to Abraham 1,200 years before Isaiah. So that's what this king's going to fulfil. God's whole purpose for the world fulfilled through this child who is to be born. And in case you think this is just too good to be true, the end of verse seven tells us that the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. That is, Isaiah is reassuring his readers, don't think this is just pie in the sky. This will happen because God is determined and zealous to make it happen. He won't be thwarted by sinful people. He won't be thwarted by bad kings. He won't be thwarted by Assyrian emperors and empires. God will make sure that his promises are fulfilled. You can trust him for that.

Isaiah's words take us far beyond his original context of Assyria threatening Israel. The promised solution you see is not just a solution to that little political military crisis. The solution lies far deeper and far greater than that. A solution to the world's problems of any age to bring about a reign of everlasting peace over the whole universe. God himself needs to act. Human beings you see cannot bring about God's kingdom. They cannot usher in the kingdom of peace and we in the last 50 years I guess have seen a great attempt in the United Nations but fail dismally because human beings can't do it.

[29 : 58] God alone can do it and he alone will act and this child who will be born is the means by which he accomplishes it. This child who will be born is the one who will bring glory to the land of Galilee, Zebulun and Naphtali in the north of Israel and it's no coincidence that when Jesus lived his first miracle was in that very area when he turned water into wine in John 2 and revealed his glory in this very land and this child is the one who will bring light to darkness and it's no coincidence that Jesus described himself as the light of the world and invited people to walk in that light.

This child will be a descendant of King David and it's no coincidence that Jesus was born in David's birthplace Bethlehem and it's no coincidence that the crowds sang about him as he went into Jerusalem for the final time Hosanna to the son of David and this child will bring peace and it's no coincidence that he went into Jerusalem on a donkey rather than a war horse and it's no coincidence that at his birth the angels sang peace on earth because of the child being born and this child will usher in God's kingdom of justice and righteousness and it's no coincidence that at his trial Jesus said my kingdom is not of this world it is of the world of God of justice and righteousness that is and this king this child will be God with us Emmanuel and it's no coincidence that Matthew's gospel calls him that he is God he is God with us let's not overlook the implications of what this is saying about Jesus Christ fully human and fully God without compromise not a flawed divinity not an unreal manhood unlike some of the sects that abound the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons and other strange groups they're wrong

Jesus fully God and fully man and he existed before Bethlehem he was God's glorious son then before he was born as a human he didn't become divine at his baptism or at his transfiguration or at the cross or his resurrection divine before eternity and he came as God's long term plan to save the world not a last minute event not a child who was born and when he was born God thought oh I think I can do something with him no he was determined by God from the beginning to save the world but remember too that he's clearly a kingly figure we tend to think of Jesus as the one who saves us and forgives us but sometimes neglect to think he is our king and we are to submit to his lordship and rule in our lives let us not ignore the implication as well that Jesus is God revealing God's glory there are those in our day and age who keep trying to tell us that God is unknowable a complete mystery they're wrong

Jesus reveals God and his glory and as Isaiah invited his readers and hearers to trust in God rather than any king or any political institution the invitation stands for us still today trust in God means trust in Jesus Christ the child the son who was given God with us arise shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us and the power of the Lord upon us hmm to nay I'm going to force the one you and to thank you my move and well for if yes .

■■ you and I'll wait