

Judgement and grace in the hands of Almighty God

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Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0 : 00] As we stand, let's pray together. Father, we come to your word now and pray that your Holy Spirit, who inspired these words to be written, would open our hearts to receive them, our minds to understand them, and our wills to live by them.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Would you please be seated? I wonder if when you were young, you had a little hideaway, secret place where you would go to if you were frightened.

Maybe it was under your bed. You would dive under there and keep out of the way. Maybe it was a tree at the bottom of the garden where you would climb up. Maybe it was down by the river. Maybe you simply ran into your mother's arms.

Children have an instinctive need, don't they, for somewhere safe to be. And of course, that's something we know as adults too, something communities have understood throughout the ages. There have been times when people would live around a castle or a keep so that if an enemy approached, everyone could leave what they were doing, run into the castle, close the doors, and they would be safe behind the walls.

[1 : 14] Nations too know the need for safety. That's why NATO was formed at the end of the Second World War. An alliance of countries together against the threat of communism, promising that if one was attacked, they would all come to their aid.

There was security in numbers. Nations like little children need a way to feel safe and secure. It was like that at the time of Isaiah as well.

And in the time we're reading in our passage this morning, that need for security was heightened. King Ahaz was the king. If you remember, by this time, the nation of Israel had already been long split into two separate countries, the northern tribes and the southern tribes, often called Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

Well, when Ahaz became king, not only were those two nations again at war with each other, but the northern kingdom had allied itself with some of the other countries around it to make a stronger alliance, threatening Judah's security further.

Well, what were they to do? What were they to do? Well, Isaiah was the prophet. He went to the king and he told him in no uncertain terms. God would protect his people as long as they trusted in him.

[2 : 37] Human alliances would do nothing. Their strength, their hope, their security was in the Lord. Ahaz, though, took no notice of that. He went to Assyria, the great superpower, and made an alliance with them.

What followed in Isaiah chapter 7 was God's response. Judgment was coming on those northern nations for standing against Judah, and on Judah itself for not trusting in the Lord.

As Isaiah pronounced that judgment, his hope, as always, was that the hearts of the people would turn back to the Lord, that they would realise their mistake and put their trust in him, even when life looked hard.

Because if they did, they would find that whilst God was bringing his judgment upon them, ultimate victory, true perfect kingship were also in his hands. True security is only found in the Lord.

Would God's people trust him? That was the dilemma here. And that's the question I'd like you to have in your own minds today as we look through this passage.

[3 : 48] In whom is your trust? In what is your hope? How do you respond when life gets tough? For just like God's Old Testament people, we are brought to a point of decision.

And here in this passage, Isaiah sets out two separate paths, two ways of walking. It's what we're going to see today.

Three different parts of this. The first is a thought about, well, how are things going to pan out? If we follow the Lord's way, what will happen? If we follow man's way, what is coming?

So what we see in these passages here is not just a retelling of historical events, but things that point to a spiritual significance that's much deeper. See, there is a choice here between the coming chaos and defeat, which Isaiah mentions in verses 1 to 8 of chapter 8, and the ultimate victory which comes to those who trust in the Lord.

Chapter 9 brings that to us. See, Isaiah had already predicted the northern defeat of the northern tribes in chapter 7, but at the beginning of chapter 8, he gets a new revelation.

[5 : 03] Words come into his mind. Isaiah is able to tell God's people that their northern enemies and their allies would be utterly crushed by Assyria.

By the time his newborn baby is able to cry out, Mummy or Daddy, their judgment is coming soon. And the reason for God's judgment upon these nations, Isaiah tells us as well, because they have turned their back on God.

See, when the northern tribes separated from Judah in the south, they quickly reverted back to pagan practices. They rejected the Davidic line of kings.

They rejected worshipping in the temple where God had placed his presence. They started worshipping around idols. And as they did that, they placed themselves outside of God's blessing and protection.

They were about to find out the cost of making that kind of call. And Isaiah explains the difference here by using two rivers. See, looking at these two rivers, the river Shiloh, which flows near Jerusalem, and the river Euphrates, well, there isn't much of a comparison.

[6 : 13] It's like comparing the size of the teen to Walbur Brook over there. If one of them was to flood, well, you'd rather be near this one, wouldn't you, than that one?

Because the date of one is so much more powerful than the other. In Isaiah's mind, the river Euphrates is a metaphor for Assyria.

And he says it's about to burst its banks and swamp down, covering northern Israel and its allies, but also flowing down into Judah. Judah had doubted God, trusting in Assyria for protection, and it would now find Assyria flooding its own land, not washing it away completely, as would happen with the northern kingdom, but drowning it up to its neck, just about above the waterline.

Assyria's military victory would serve as a warning to Judah on how to handle its international affairs and where to place its trust. And when we look at this choice and what happened, it should do the same to us as well.

For outside of God, there is no safe place on which to stand. Alliances with the world and other religions will not protect us from the flood of God's judgment. As Jesus told in his famous parable of the wise and foolish builders, the only safe and secure place on which to stand is Christ.

[7 : 35] And we see how that turns out in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 9. Looking far ahead to the future, Isaiah predicts the coming of the Saviour.

It's interestingly that the places where Assyria first entered the nation on its march of conquest are the same places where Jesus did his early public ministry. The place of great darkness under Assyria would see the greatest light in Jesus.

The place that had known the greatest mourning would know the greatest joy. For when the kingdom of God's Christ is fully established, all burdens, bars and rods will be shattered.

All traces of war and evil will be destroyed forever. That's the first contrast Isaiah gives us here. Trusting in worldly alliances leading to destruction and chaos and defeat.

Or trusting in Christ, which leads us to a place of ultimate victory. So where is our trust and our hope today? We're not threatened by the Assyrians, but when life gets complicated, when it gets messy, when difficulties come, is our hope and our trust in our pension, our finances, our home or family?

[8 : 49] Is it in our political leaders to lead us out of the mess into a new future? All of these prove poor castles in the day of trouble. Only Jesus can keep us safe in the storm.

There's a second choice between how we live in those times of uncertainty. It's a choice between darkness, doubt and deceit and glorious light and divine truth.

It's very easy to get depressed, worried or terrified about the state of the world, isn't it? Seems that we are so helpless when it comes to stopping evil regimes, wicked philosophies or powers doing their worst.

And because the media loves a shocking headline, the way they present the news to us just builds on those fears. Well, one way to handle that pressure is simply to turn the TV off and to close the newspaper and not pay any attention.

That's something to be said for that, especially if you're of a more nervous disposition. But other people look for someone to blame for all the mess. It's the fault of the rich, powerful elite.

[10:01] It's all the media's fault. It's all the fault of that other religion or that ethnic group. Seems today as well to be a huge rise on people across the whole political spectrum, believing in complicated conspiracy theories.

Encouraging people to look to themselves to save the world. To make America great again or the USA great again or China or Russia or Europe, wherever.

Other people turn in anger from God, raging their fists at him, pushing God's word aside, rejecting the Bible's teaching, turning instead in some cases to what Isaiah here calls mediums and spiritists to find some solace for their souls.

One commentary I read made the point that probably now in Rome there are more mediums than there are Roman Catholic priests. I would imagine that there are more mediums in Newton Abbott than there are Christian ministers of all denominations.

Because in difficult times when life is scary and the way ahead uncertain, people will look anywhere they can think they might find some comfort. One commentator put it this way, when people stop believing in the God of the Bible, they don't stop believing in everything.

[11:19] They start believing in anything. And many of these things, especially spiritism and the occult, eventually sadly offer only greater darkness.

And they lead people further away from the true light of God. In Isaiah's day, many people were seeking a different kind of authority and light, plunging themselves into darkness.

And astonishingly, that still happens today. Even within the church, I hear of Christians worshipping in church on a Sunday and then heading to the spiritualist church or to a medium later in the week. I don't understand how that can be. Isaiah is absolutely clear where that leads. To distress and darkness, to fear and gloom.

It leads a person away from Christ. Away from the one who is the world's true light. Well, Isaiah is very clear in this passage what Christians should do when life gets hard.

[12:19] Not to close the doors or get angry or look to other sources. Instead, he says we are to wait for the Lord and put our trust in him.

Verse 17. We're to hold on to his testimony of warning. Verse 20. And consult God's living word. For here in the scriptures we have God's unchanging and reliable truth.

Here is the invitation to life in all its fullness. Here we find solid ground for our feet. Strength for our shaking legs. Peace for our troubled hearts.

Hope for our weary souls. Because here we find Jesus who is the bread of life. And the water of life. Where else should we go when life is hard and the waters and worries rise but to him?

Two futures then. Chaos and defeat. Or Christ's ultimate victory. Two wisdoms as we walk through life. One bringing darkness, doubt and deceit.

[13:21] The other glorious light and divine truth. And that picture is symbolised for us here with two children. One was a signal of coming destruction.

And one who would bring lasting peace and joy. A standing joke at my theological college was that there was rarely a name in the Old Testament that one of the ordinands hadn't used for their children.

Some of them a long complex series of Old Testament names that never feature on the top 1000 list of popular children's names. But none of them went as far as Isaiah.

And calling a child Mahashal al-Hashbaz. It's probably just as well, isn't it? But of course Isaiah gives his son that name because they are to act as a sign for what is coming.

If you had your Bibles open, you'll know that at the bottom of the page there is a little note. A little note saying that Mahashal al-Hashbaz means quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.

[14:27] It's a name that pointed to the fact that when the Assyrians arrived, they would sweep through the land with such speed and ferocity that they would leave the people in shock and awe.

And nothing, not armies or alliances or defences would stand against them. Isaiah uses the image of a river bursting its banks, flooding everything in its path.

But what it's describing is a military route like the German advances over the low countries in France at the start of the Second World War. And Isaiah is so sure of what is coming that even before the child is conceived, he writes the name down in the presence of two witnesses.

And then he gives that name to his child as a sign to the people once he has been born. But there's another child in the passage as well, isn't there?

A child whose coming heralds a very different outcome. Isaiah 9 is one of those passages which we always read in our carol services. Maybe you remember it from that.

[15 : 33] But this is not some kind of sentimental nonsense. The glorious victory we spoke about earlier in verses 1 to 5 only comes about because of this child who is born to us.

Because of the son who is given to us. And what a name this child has. Or more exactly, what names this child has. Wonderful counsellor.

Mighty God. Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace. These names point us in one direction, don't they? They point us to Jesus. Because only he can give us perfect counsel for life.

Only Jesus reveals the might and glory of God in all his fullness. Only Jesus can give us access to our everlasting Father. Because only Jesus, through his death on the cross in our place, can deal with our sin and our selfishness.

And bring us true and everlasting peace with God. And so the choice Isaiah leaves the people with, and the choice we have to face for ourselves, is this. Who will we put our trust in?

[16 : 39] Will we put our trust in Jesus? Will we let his teachings shape our understanding of the world? Will we put his commands into practice in our lives? Will we walk by his light?

Trusting in his goodness. Relying on his power and promises. Remember that Isaiah was writing to people who knew God's word.

Who gathered regularly at the temple. Who made their sacrifices. Yet despite knowing and doing all those things, the state of the world had caused them to turn away from God.

To give in to doubt and despair. And to plunge themselves into darkness. Rather than by walking by God's marvellous light. People of Jesus' day were no different.

There they were having Jesus, the light of the world, in their midst. But as we heard in our gospel reading, so many of them rejected him. While so many others were undecided.

[17 : 44] Well, where are we today? Given these two futures, these two ways to live, which route are we taking? We can't take both.

There is no fence to sit on. There are moments in our lives of decision when we have to make a choice. And there are moments to press on and to keep on with the decision that we have already made.

But we cannot sit on our hands. In the face of Assyrian might and the crumbling of his nation, Isaiah said this. I will wait for the Lord.

I will put my trust in him. With the challenges that we face today. In whom are we trusting?

The Lord is a secure hope for us. His promises will last. And the glorious victory that Jesus won will one day come to be a kingdom of which we are invited to be part.

[18 : 48] We need to stand firm and trust in the Lord. May we do that. Amen. Amen.