

The Hope

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[0 : 00] Well now, our passage for this morning is the lesson from Isaiah chapter 60, which we heard a few minutes ago.

Please turn it up in your Bibles, page 619. And the focus of the passage is actually the first verse. Let me read it. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. I was given a title for this message, The Hope. What hope? Our hope, yours and mine. The hope that is highlighted every Advent and celebrated every Christmas. Well, that sets the perspective of what I want to say.

[1 : 16] And really, all that we need to do is to follow through these verses with understanding of what's going on.

Isaiah, as I suppose we all know, is often called the evangelical prophet because so many of his prophecies point forward to the Lord Jesus Christ and his ministry and the church, which by his coming, his life, his death, his resurrection and his enthronement, and finally his sending of the Spirit, he has brought into being.

The church of which, by God's grace, we who believe and hope in Christ are part. Well, this chapter is, shall I say, vintage Isaiah in this respect.

So, what are we to learn? We're to learn quite a lot, actually, from this prophecy. But if we're to understand it properly, there's something that we need to be clear on before we start about the way in which the Old and the New Testaments relate and the way in which the Old Testament prophets, in particular, are used by God to bring his message to New Testament Christians.

So, let me spend a word just sketching that in. Yes, God, from the outset, planned the whole New Testament scheme of things.

[3 : 21] The Lord Jesus Christ, supreme in everything. That's how Paul puts it, you'll remember, in Colossians chapter 1. He's the co-creator with the Father, who now is the Savior of sinners.

And so, the King in the kingdom, which is the church, and the focus of, or should be the focus, of all our understanding of what's going on in God's world.

He is Lord of all. As Peter said, preaching to Cornelius, Lord of all, and to be honored and acknowledged, worshipped, and glorified in all the living that we do.

Indeed, in all the living, ideally, that all the folk in this world do. And, alas, many as yet don't. So, the church is on mission, seeking to bring the rest of the race in, so that we shall all worship the Savior together.

Oh, yes, it's a dream. There will never be a converted world. But as we seek to spread the gospel, the Lord, from his throne, through the Spirit, works in human hearts, and the church grows and grows.

[5 : 04] Praise the Lord for that. But now, in the Old Testament, what you've got is a temporary order of things, a temporary dispensation, to use the word that Christians have used for centuries, a temporary dispensation, which corresponds to what we might call junior school.

It's a temporary dispensation, to use the word that Christians have used for centuries, and to use the word that Christians have used for centuries.

Godliness. And the people of Israel, they may properly be thought of as the family of God, to whom God is teaching the basics of godly family life.

That's, of course, where the Ten Commandments fit in. And the Old Testament order of things looks back to God making a covenant with Abram to save Abram's people, Abram's seed.

And they look forward to the coming of the king, who will, in fact, bring the fullness of God's grace and mercy and what I might call adult godliness to his family and, indeed, to the world.

[7 : 08] And to his family, thus being educated, God sends message after message through his prophets.

And the way to understand the prophets, therefore, is as teachers of Israel regarding their hope. And may I say often the prophets' messages of hope are, how can I say, contextualized by warnings, messages of judgment that's coming because the family has misbehaved so grievously. But nonetheless, the focus is always on the hope that's coming, the future glory that's on its way, the Messiah, the divinely anointed king who is going to be the mediator of it all. And when we read the Old Testament prophets, well, we must remember that that's what's going on.

[8 : 37] If you like, you could say that the Old Testament is a transitional dispensation, starting from God's covenant with Abram and his family, and advancing as the family grows towards the day when the king will come in his glory and the fullness of family life will be achieved.

And that, of course, will be the church of which, as I said a moment ago, we are part. And that brings us to Isaiah chapter 60, where the first words are very striking, very challenging, and yet resonant with glory, in fact.

We know those words, of course, from listening to Handel's Messiah.

But you just focus on them, you realize these are glorious words. Thrilling words in themselves.

Two things are happening here. The first is, darkness is being dispelled. And that's the thought into which verse 1 of the chapter leads us.

[10 : 30] What is the darkness? Well, it's spiritual darkness, of course. The darkness of not knowing the Lord, not being in fellowship with God, wandering lost through sin in a world which has become disordered and disorderly.

And you know what it's like wandering around in complete darkness. There are obstacles. You hit them. You stumble.

You don't know where you're going. You lose your sense of direction. It's really a nightmare life to be in thoroughgoing darkness.

And thoroughgoing darkness, so Isaiah says, is what we have here. Verse 2. For, this is why the light needed to rise.

Behold, darkness shall cover the earth. Thick darkness shall cover the peoples. And against that background, the second half of verse 2 says, But the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.

[11 : 55] What's being said? The picture is of God coming with light to folk in darkness. God coming to be light.

To folk in darkness. Here, we can't but think of what Jesus said. I am the light of the world. And if you use your imagination to think of the misery of bumbling and stumbling around in total darkness, you will appreciate the glory of the proclamation of life.

Of light, I'm sorry. Light, actually, is, of course, the bringer of life. But light is what I meant to say. And when it says, When the glory of the Lord has risen upon you, well, the glory of the Lord is the light that is God.

When the Lord comes to bless, well, it's always light in darkness. And so it is in this particular vision.

Yes, it is a vision. And Isaiah is spelling it out in visionary terms. We can understand that. We watch television, after all.

[13 : 24] And we are quite used to seeing, shall I say, visionary presentations of things. And the visionary presentation of things presented to our eyes brings the reality of what's presented, the reality of thought about it, into our minds.

Now, the glory of the Lord is the bright light associated with God that indicates his goodness, his generosity, his kindness, his love, and the fact that he gives glorious gifts so that those who receive his light henceforth walk in light.

Of course, that's a theme which the New Testament itself picks up. While we have the light, we are to walk in the light. That's one way of expressing the Christian calling.

So, divine glory has shone upon us. It's Jerusalem in particular, and Israel in general, that Isaiah is addressing.

But remember, I said, these Old Testament prophecies so often, Isaiah's prophecies in particular, so often point forward to New Testament realities.

[15:10] So, we should be thinking of walking in the light of Christ when we hear these words from the prophet. But, arise, shine, your light has come, the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

There was, well, there's going to be, because Isaiah speaks of the future here. There's going to be darkness covering the earth, thick darkness covering the peoples.

The full understanding of that is that the darkness is here already, but things are going to get worse before they get better. The moment is going to come, however, when God's light shines, and God's people become aware that God's light is shining on them, and that it's transforming their circumstances and the life that they're living.

So, look on to verse 3. Nations shall come to your light, the light that you're in, the light that's shining out in some sense from you, although ultimately from God.

God's light, however, is being reflected in your life. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

[16:43] God's light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

This is the basic ingredient, seems to me, of Christian witness. For talk, mere talk, about Jesus isn't going to achieve anything if our light isn't shining from our lives.

Nations shall come to your light, and kings shall come to your rising. So that we make an impact that has, shall I say, a godly quality on the lives of those to whom we're testifying.

So, nations, says Isaiah, nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising, to share what it is that you've got, and that they've come to want.

So, darkness is going to be dispelled. That's the first thought in this oracle, and this is how it's going to be dispelled.

[18:25] And then, second thought, enrichment is guaranteed. That's verses 4 down to verse 7.

And specific items of enrichment for the Lord's people, the people who are shining the light, being the light.

The enrichment is presented rather like a string of pearls. Unfortunately, though, for us, we don't understand all the background until it's explained to us.

And so, it's easy to read these next few verses and miss their force. Now, let's try and see just how forceful they are.

Verse 4. Lift up your eyes all around and see. Look at what's happening. What should be happening and what Isaiah, in his vision, imagines happening.

[19:39] That's what God tells him to say. Lift up your eyes all around and see. They all gather together. They come to you.

Your sons shall come from afar and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. The thought is that instead of Israel, Jerusalem, God's people, who are, as far as the world is concerned, marginal to everything.

They don't count. They don't count. They're not important. They are appropriately overlooked and not bothered with. No. Things change.

Things will change, says Isaiah. They're all gathering together. They're all gathering together to you. You, the Lord's family, the Lord's people, the church.

Details. Those are the ones. Your sons shall come from afar and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. A bit about the daughters is a picture of how things are done under a sense of urgency.

[21:01] And, in fact, we've seen it in pictures on the telly as refugees, even mothers with babies, have left their homes and are walking as best they can with their children on their hips, as being carried the way that in the Near East in those days daughters were, well, young children, both sexes actually were carried on the hip.

We have other ways of doing it, but that's how they did it then. And you see some of that as folk from Near Eastern countries that are in trouble, with their young children, step out away from their homes and become refugees.

Well, this isn't a case of refugees traveling. This is a case of families being reunited.

It's your sons, your daughters. You've been separated from them, but now they're coming to you. Families reunited is one of the blessings, then, says Isaiah, one of the blessings of the shining of God's light in the life of his family.

[22:42] Okay. That's one form of enrichment. And then comes the further form of...

I should have said... Then comes the further form that is celebrated in verse 5.

That's how I meant to say it. Then you'll see and be radiant. Your heart will thrill and exult.

Well, yes. When your families, your sons, your daughters, young children whom you've had to part from, are restored to your company and the family is one again, it brings tremendous joy and delight and exultation.

And that's what is being spoken of here. See and be radiant. As if light is going to shine out from you.

[23 : 55] As, well, indeed it is. For you're walking in God's light. And you will be the reflector of that light.

And you will be rejoicing yourself. Your heart shall thrill and exult. Yes. And there will be overwhelming, unexpected, but deep and glorious joy.

That's part of the hope. And with that will come, next thought, a revitalizing of worship.

But first of all, there's a list given of the... Well, the list given of major towns from which people will come.

The wealth of the nations will come to link up with you.

[25 : 10] And again, we're at a disadvantage because we don't know these names. And it wouldn't have occurred to us that, as is said in terms of the ancient Near Eastern culture, a multitude of camels will come to you and be presented to you.

That would, of course, have been a wonderful, wealth-giving thing to happen in the ancient Near East. But to us, I suppose, it cannot help sounding strange.

Yes, the camels will come, the young camels, etc. All the places are named, Midian and Ephah and Sheba.

They'll be coming because they represent wealth. And wealth is coming to you. That's what's being said.

The reconciling, the renewed togetherness of the family is an enrichment in one way.

[26 : 35] The gift of camels is an enrichment another way. It goes on like that, you see. The rams of Nebaioth, they're going to come to you, and so on, and so on.

And there's going to be a revitalizing of worship. Now, that is very significant, I think you will agree. A revitalizing of worship.

Because that really is how all of us benefit, are enriched spiritually, and how God supremely, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, gets glory supremely.

It's through the revitalizing of worship. It's through the revitalizing of worship, whereby our hearts and our concerns are more and more taken up with the glorifying of God.

And it's the glorifying of God, which rounds off this vision of the restoration of Israel, the restoration of God's people in the future.

[28 : 07] And I will be here. They'll come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house.

Yes, I suppose there was a gap there. I should have said other animals are going to minister to you. The reference, actually, is to sacrifices which please God under the Old Testament order of things. And the animal sacrifices that God required of his family in those days will be offered, and offered acceptably so that they minister to you.

That's the phrase halfway through, verse 7. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and thus I, this is God speaking now, I will beautify my beautiful house.

That's the temple. And those words correspond to the thought, I, God, will get myself glory as I bring together all these folk with all this wealth for all this spiritual renewal and joy.

[29 : 44] And it's a foreshadowing what's going to happen in glory.

And it's something which, in measure, ought to be happening, you know, in all our homes and all our families, Christmas by Christmas, as we celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus on his first visit. And we know what wonderful results flowed from that first visit. Salvation with all the riches that that brings.

And yes, there's a prospect of a second coming at which even greater enrichments, enrichments beyond our imagining, are going to come to us, and we shall be with the Lord forever.

And, as we think of these things at Christmas time, as Advent leads us into Christmas, as Advent 4, 4th Sunday, is doing for us this morning, there can be, and some of us, I'm sure, could testify to there having been, touches on our hearts, which we knew were from the Lord Jesus himself.

[31 : 27] He touches us. We don't have visions of him, no, and we don't have a visitation from him yet, but he draws near.

And the sense that Christ is touching me with the life that he brings, that is the best of all Christmas presents, as a matter of fact, a present from the Lord.

So, this oracle tells us of how rich we really are, even though, as yet, we haven't entered into the fullness of it, but we are wonderfully rich in Christ, and with Christ, and as we dwell on these things, and realize, he says, yes, he's alive, he reigns, he's there, but he's also here with me.

Lo, I'm with you always, even to the end of the world, he says. And that means, day by day, he is with us, and with, in his company, with him, we are wonderfully enriched, and we should be fulfilling us, or seeing fulfilled in ourselves, the words of verse 3, that verse 4, that I commented on before, sorry, if it's verse 5, you'll see and be radiant, and your heart will thrill and exult.

May that be our portion, this Christmas. May it begin to be our portion, at the Lord's table this morning. When we say, God bless, when we say, Lord Jesus, draw near, this is what we should be hoping for, right now.

[33 : 46] And, please God, this is what we shall enjoy, right now, as we proceed with our service. God bless us all.

Amen.