

To Us a Son is Given

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[0 : 00] Hi, everybody.

It's a little early to say Merry Christmas, but, you know, it's the fourth Sunday of Advent and we kind of lean over into the Christmas season. So if I say Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas.

Ah, well done. Well done. Well done. You got them all ready, Aaron. Good job. All right, let's pray together, friends. Father, this is a familiar time of year and we hear readings that we've heard before and we sing songs that we've sung before.

And we ask that you would renew in us that sense of wonder at the reality to which all these things point, the reality of your Son.

So will you now by your Spirit come among us with power? And will you grant us to see what it is you have done for us in sending your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, to take upon himself our nature and to be one of us for our salvation?

[1 : 25] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Last night, I got a haircut. And you can comment on the haircut later.

But I hate, I hate getting my hair cut. There are a few things in the world I hate more than getting my hair cut. And I found myself sitting there.

I kind of have different ways of dealing with the problem of sitting there as the clippings fall down on my face. I just hate getting my hair cut. But last night, I was sitting there and to my view, it's made worse because there's a mirror right in front of you.

So I try not to look at the mirror. And right next to the mirror, there was a poster. You know how they have posters of, I don't know, maybe it's so you can have an idea of how you want to get your hair cut or something like that.

It was a very attractive woman on a poster right next to the mirror, which was good. And there were three letters next to this very attractive woman.

[2 : 35] J-O-Y. Joy. And the O, I appreciate this, the O was not an O, it was a snowflake.

And so it made me feel a little bit better about getting my hair cut because apparently the path to joy happens when you get a haircut at this particular facility, which was helpful and encouraging.

And then I was trying to think about anything else other than the clippings in my face. And so I was listening to the radio and they had a holiday playlist. And the song War Is Over by John Lennon.

Do you know that song? So this is Christmas. Yeah. And it came on, which is great. I liked John Lennon and the Beatles, all that kind of thing. So I was listening. And right in the middle of it, the main kind of refrain is, war is over if you want it.

And I found myself sitting there, again, trying to dissociate from my current experience, realizing that within the 15 minutes it took to get my hair cut, I had been told that real Christmas joy is a function of getting your hair cut at the right place.

[3 : 56] And true Christmas peace is a function of desiring it a whole bunch. And, you know, at that moment, as I reflected on this, I thought to myself, this is utterly bizarre.

I mean, this is ridiculous. I mean, here we are, these words, joy, and this concept, peace, has been flung at me while I'm getting my hair cut, which I kind of appreciate because of the distraction, but has been flung at me without any, any reality at all.

I mean, the way joy is used and the way the concept of peace was presented to me right there while I was getting my hair cut, it was nothing more than just rhetoric and kind of sentimentalism.

Which I would imagine is really good if you want to sell something. But it threatens to completely obscure what we want to deal with tonight.

Now, tonight, what I want to do is I want to look at Isaiah chapter 9, which is the bit of the reading that we read together, you can look at it on the first page of your service sheet, and Isaiah chapter 9

is all about joy and it is all about peace.

[5 : 26] But one of the threats to us understanding this is as we come to this passage, we risk hearing about joy and hearing about peace and in our minds thinking, Isaiah, is just as empty as all the marketing slogans that are getting thrown at us at this time of year.

And what I want to show you tonight is that when Isaiah talks about joy and when Isaiah talks about peace and when Christians talk about peace and joy surrounding the events of Christmas, we are not talking about empty rhetoric.

We are not presenting empty sentimentalism. We are talking about something that is absolutely rigorous, absolutely real, and it is the object of your deepest desire.

This is what you were made for to know this kind of joy and this kind of peace. That's what I want to show you tonight. And if you're a Christian, all I want to do, all I want to do is remind you where your true peace comes from.

And if you're not a Christian, all I want to do is show you that when Christians talk about the peace and the joy surrounding Christmas, we are not talking about empty rhetoric.

[6 : 45] We are not talking about sentimentalism. We are talking about something that changes people's lives. Does that sound okay? Can we do that? Okay. Let's look at Isaiah. And I want to show you that when Isaiah is talking about, you know, this is a hymn and it's all about peace and joy and it is, he's talking about the real world here.

Let me give you a little bit of background on Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who lived about 700 years before Jesus. He lived and ministered in the city of Jerusalem and he was very involved in the politics of the day.

Now, 8th century BC was a very bad time to be involved in Israelite politics. I'm not sure that there's ever been a good time to be involved in Israelite politics, but the 8th century was particularly bad.

The reason was, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Israel was in the north, Judah was in the south.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were becoming increasingly weak politically and militarily.

And at the same time, their neighbors to the north and the east and the west were becoming increasingly powerful. And that put Israel in a very, very difficult position because they knew that as their neighbors became more powerful, they would not be able to protect themselves politically and militarily.

[8 : 14] And so what they needed to do is they needed to find somebody to protect them. They needed to make an alliance with one of their neighbors so that one of their more powerful neighbors would protect them from the other ones.

The trouble is, all of their neighbors were terrible tyrants. It was a really bad situation. To the north, you had Assyria, who were notorious for being utterly brutal.

And then to the east, you had Babylon, which wasn't a whole lot better. And to the south, you had Egypt, which had always been a troublesome bit. So they were surrounded by hostile, hostile neighbors who wanted to perpetrate oppression upon Israel.

And so if you were Israel or Judah at this time, it seemed when you looked down towards history or towards the future, it looked as if your destiny was going to be a destiny of perpetual oppression and there was to be no peace in the future for you.

That's what it was to be in Israelite politics at this time. Now I want to stop right here and point something out. Now, this is part of the reason this passage, whatever it is, it cannot be mere rhetoric.

[9 : 37] It cannot be mere sentimentalism. When you are staring down the barrel of real suffering and the threat of real death, empty rhetoric and empty sentimentalism doesn't cut it.

In fact, if you are staring down the reality of real suffering and real death, when you hear empty rhetoric and empty sentimentalism, it will infuriate you.

It will make you cringe. It will make you hostile. Because you know that it's just empty platitudes when you are facing real need. And as an aside, some of the reason some of you are struggling at this time of the year is because you're suffering and all you hear when you walk through the mall is a whole bunch of empty cheer.

And it grinds you. For Israel, they would not put up with this text if it was just empty sentimentalism. The only thing that could produce the kind of joy you see in this song is if there was something real and true about the peace and the liberation it was presenting.

[10:58] And look at verse 4. This is exactly what Isaiah talks about. He says, For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you, speaking about God, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Now, Midian, the day of Midian was a day in Israel's past when God had used a guy called Gideon to liberate Israel from their oppressors. And what Isaiah is saying right here in verse 4 is that he's looking at Israel in all its fear and he's saying, Friends, the power that you fear most in this world is going to be broken by God.

God is going to break the power of your oppression. Now, assuming that promise is a true promise, that is the kind of promise that makes oppressed people rejoice because it gives them hope that they have a future that will end in peace.

But it gets better. Look at verse 5. Chapter 9, verse 5. For every boot of the trampling warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

What does that mean? Think about the imagery. He's describing a soldier's uniform. He's describing military uniforms. He's saying the boot of the warrior, the garments rolled in blood.

[12:29] He's saying you're not... When this piece that I'm talking about, says Isaiah, when this piece shows up, you're not going to need military uniforms anymore. You're not going to need military equipment anymore because the piece, when it comes, will be so lasting that you will never have to defend this piece.

You will never have to fight for it again. And therefore, you will never have to live under the fear of tyranny and oppression ever again. Now, can you see why?

This is a song of joy. Verse 3 says, You have increased our joy, O Lord. It's a song of joy because it's making really big promises. And it's promising that God's going to come, He's going to break the oppression, and He's going to give them lasting peace.

Now, think with me here. Remember what I said. Here's Israel. It's weak. It's surrounded by neighbors that are strong.

And they're looking for somebody to protect them. And so they're trying to make alliances with Assyria or with Babylon or with Egypt. But the trouble is, all their alliances are just going to make them more and more oppressed.

[13:44] The thing that they really need, the only way this peace that Isaiah is talking about has any chance of really happening is if they can make a better alliance with a better king.

They need a king who is stronger than all their neighbors, and they need a king who's better than all their neighbors. They need a king who's loving.

They need a king who will not oppress them when they make an alliance with him. Okay. Now, I know. I know what some of you are thinking. Some of you are thinking, I thought this was Christmas.

Why are you talking about ancient Israelite politics? What does this have to do with mangers and babies? The reality is it has everything to do with Christmas.

Because according to Isaiah, Christmas is when that better king and that better alliance showed up. According to Isaiah, Christmas is when this powerful peace broke in upon Israel and broke in upon the world.

[14:51] Let me show you what I mean. Look at verse 6. Verse 6 is a prophecy about Christmas. It's on page 2. For to us a child is born, and 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.

Now, that verse will be familiar to some of you because it handles Messiah. But I want you to see, do you see what's shocking about that verse? Do you see what's shocking about that verse? Isaiah is saying that there's going to be a child born, and this child, when he is born, will be powerful enough to liberate Israel and to liberate us from everything that could possibly oppress us.

Look at this child's name. End of verse 6. And his name shall be called, first of all, Wonderful Counselor. Isaiah is saying, he's going to be perfectly wise.

He's going to be perfectly insightful. He's going to be able to lead Israel through all the difficulties of life, and he's going to be able to know where he's going and how to get there. He's the Wonderful Counselor.

[16:10] Number two, he's the mighty God. I mean, that should just floor us. This child will be unlimitedly powerful.

He'll be so powerful that he'll be able to overpower all of Israel's enemies. He'll be able to defeat and overpower and break every sort of oppression that could possibly confront Israel.

And he's the everlasting father. Not only is he powerful, and this is where the news really, really gets good. Not only is he powerful, but he's also supremely loving.

He's so loving that he's willing to sacrifice himself, just like any good father is willing to sacrifice himself. And when you put this collage together, what Isaiah is saying is that this child is the king who is powerful enough to save Israel, but is also good enough that he will not be their tyrant.

He will bring peace instead of oppression. And Isaiah is saying, this king is God. God's the only one that could fit this bill.

[17:22] Now, I could just imagine somebody coming back at me at this point. I could just imagine somebody saying, Jim, this sounds nice.

This sounds very quaint. This just sounds so nice. It sounds very nice that there would be a strong, loving God somewhere up in the clouds who peers down periodically over the edge of a cloud or something and likes to kind of say nice things to us and fill us with all sorts of peace and things like that.

But I could imagine somebody else, somebody coming to me and saying, but that sounds mythological and it sounds sentimental and it sounds like a bunch of religious rhetoric and it sounds completely disconnected with the real world.

To which I would say, you're absolutely right, except that's not what this image is about. Look back at verse 6. Look at the beginning of verse 6.

Look at what it says about that king. The child is to be born. Look at that verse. Whose son is this child? Now I know in a bunch of your heads you just said, well, he's God's son.

[18:40] He must be God's son. Well, you're right. We find that out in different passages. But in this verse, it is to us a child is born. To us a son is given.

This kid is God. We find that out at the end of the verse. But this kid is also our son. He's the son of Israel. He's humanity's son.

He's Mary's son. Now why should you care about that? Let me tell you why. Because it kills every last hint of empty sentimentalism.

Think about this. If God has entered human life, if God has become a son of humanity, then it means he has entered into history.

It means that the peace and the joy that he offers is not just empty rhetoric. It's not sappy sentimentalism. It is real and it is rigorous because it is rooted in history. I mean, typically when people think about gods, when people think about, you know, deities, they usually think about some sort of spirit who is far off and has a pretty good gig.

[20:01] Right? I mean, gods typically don't suffer. You know? Gods are kind of above that. They get to look down on us and watch us. Oh yes, it is rather terrible down there, isn't it?

They get to stay way up high. Gods don't die. You know? Gods aren't victimized. They just stay up in heaven. They look down and they throw demands at us and they point out at how badly we're doing.

Isn't that the way a lot of people think about God? Okay. That is not the God of the Bible and that is not the God of Isaiah and that is not the God of Christmas.

According to Scripture, God entered into our human existence. He became one of us. I mean, how can I... According to Scripture, God entered humanity and entered the world by being born.

There is nothing sentimental about the birthing process. And the reason I say that is because you've got to see that this...

[21:14] to this child, to us a child is given, to us a son is given, that this child is every bit as human as you are. Which means he has experienced life every bit as authentically as you have.

And there is nothing metaphorical about it. There is nothing sentimental about it. There is nothing rhetorical about it. It's not philosophy. It is history. And as a human being, Jesus experienced everything that could possibly oppress you.

He experienced personally everything that could possibly ever steal your peace and he conquered it. Friends, humanity is tyrannized by death.

If you've ever experienced somebody close to you die or if you've ever experienced a terminal illness, if you've ever been close to death where you've really had to consider it, you know that humanity is tyrannized by death.

God knows all about it. because Jesus was suffocated under the dark weight of death and he experienced it and he broke its power when he rose again.

[22 : 40] Friends, we are tyrannized by suffering. We're tyrannized by inward suffering. We're tyrannized by physical suffering.

Friends, Jesus knows all about both. Jesus knows all about both. And he didn't just talk about it. He didn't just give you some nice insights for your spiritual journey.

He entered into the experience of suffering. He knows what it was to be betrayed and abandoned.

He knows what it is to be abused. He knows what it is to be a prisoner.

He knows what it is to experience horrific pain. And when he rose again and when he ascended on high he looked at the world and he said behold I will make all things new.

And just as my suffering was undone after the resurrection he looked at the world and he said I will undo your suffering and I will make this world new.

[23 : 42] The Lord broke the power of suffering. And all of us friends are tyrannized by sin and guilt. We carry around with us wherever we go.

And when Jesus hung upon the cross he received all our guilt and all our sin and when he died upon the cross he broke its power. Now can you see why Isaiah is singing with such joy?

because he's looking forward to a day when he sees something that the rest of Israel can't see. That's why he wrote it down and shared it with him.

He can see that God is going to give Israel peace because the king is going to show up in person.

And can you see why it is that Christians when we look back to Christmas we sing with such joy because we can see that God got the job done.

[24 : 46] And he got the job done not just by talking about it. He got the job done because he rolled up his sleeves he got his hands dirty he experienced the worst life has to offer and then he triumphed over all of it and that's why he can give us real peace and real joy.

Okay we gotta stop but how does this become real in your life? peace and joy stops being sentimental and rhetorical when Jesus governs your life.

Look at verse 7 of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. Now just look at that phrase for a moment.

Do you see that as the government of Jesus increases so peace increases. There's a positive correlation between the two. Remember what I said before about Israel.

Israel was making out of their fear they were making alliances with tyrants. They were running off to Assyria, they were running off to Egypt, they were running off to Babylon.

[25 : 57] The trouble is they were trusting tyrants and so every time they'd enter into an alliance it would put them under greater and greater oppression. And their peace would be stolen, was stolen.

Now friends, the same is true for you and I. Because the reality is all of us spend most of our life serving tyrants. I mean you know how it works.

Everybody serves something. You know the usual suspects. We serve money or success or status or self-fulfillment or pleasure or whatever else it is.

There's something that drives us and that we live for and if we live for something it rules us. The trouble is all of those things and the list could go on all of those things end up becoming tyrants in our lives.

They oppress us and the longer we serve them the more they oppress us and they press us down and they steal all our peace and the reason is they could never love you.

[27 : 04] Money can never love you. Success can never love you. Status can never love you. And as you serve those things they become exacting demanding wicked task masters and they bruise your back and your shoulder with their rod.

But the thing with Jesus is he's the one ruler who never becomes our tyrant. he's the one ruler who never oppresses us and the reason he never oppresses us is that he loves us so much that he gave his life for us.

And that's the first place you taste and savor the peace that Christmas offers. The first place you savor the peace that God gives us is when you know God's love for you.

I mean all of us know that you can have a perfect life but if your relationships stink the rest of your life is not going to be anything but oppression.

And the same is true with God. When God, when you come under the government of Jesus and when he adopts you and brings you into the family of God and sets away your sin and promises you

a future and promises you eternal life and then fills you with his Holy Spirit so that you begin to know the Father's affection, that's the first taste we get of real, lasting, eternal peace.

[28 : 52] And because we taste and savor the love of God, we know that the rest of the peace is coming, that one day there will be for us who follow Christ, there will be a new creation when all things are made new.

Friends, that's the liberation that Christmas is talking about. That's the peace that Isaiah dreamed about. That's the type of peace that gives birth to joy.

And I hope you can see that it is not rhetoric. I hope you can see that it is so precious. So savor it. Amen.