

# Christmas Light

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Date: 24 December 2011

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's bow our heads and pray. We ask now, our God and Father, in the quietness of this moment, you would shine your spirit directly into our hearts.

As we look at these words written by the prophet Isaiah, our hearts would be filled with the light and joy of Christ's coming so that we might know him and love him and be with him forever.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Please sit down. And if you'd like to follow on, please turn back to page 3, to the reading of Isaiah 8 and 9, which we're going to be looking at, mostly the second paragraph, Isaiah 9.

And as you do that, you know it's been a very bad year for dictators this year. The year began with al-Bashir in Sudan losing the whole half, the bottom half of Sudan in a democratic election.

And the year finished with Kim Jong-il dying, sorry, Kim Jong-il, got to get that right, Kim Jong-il dying, the glorious general who descended from heaven, the guiding star of the 21st century, the son of the communist future.

[ 1 : 28 ] These are some of the names he gave himself. The ever-victorious iron-willed commander, and my favourite, the highest incarnation of revolutionary camaraderie love. I'm thinking of giving that title to Dan.

It's too long to put on his office door though. In between those, we saw Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in a cage and court in Cairo. And the leaders of Tunisia and Yemen and Bahrain have stepped down. Mama Gaddafi was murdered by the people who supposedly loved him. And even Vladimir Putin is seeing some opposition, not because he's too strong, but because people think he's not strong enough.

It's been a bad year for dictators, and it's also been a bad year for those who predict the future. They used to call themselves futurologists, but now they call themselves futurists because there's more room to move.

Some have taken the name predictioneers, but the trend is away from predicting to forecasting, from mega trends to micro trends, because uncertainty looks much smarter.

[ 2 : 42 ] And the most tragic example this year of the error of predictioning was the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. The Japanese government and the people put their faith in the early warning system, which completely failed them, and 18,000 people died in that event.

And the Fukushima power plant continues to leak even today. Closer to home in Vancouver, the week before the Stanley Cup finals, we heard, and I quote, no riots are predicted.

And as usual, at the end of the year, there's some Christian-style prophet announcing the end of the world, and he knows the date. God's told him the date. And I just, it's, we have to apologise for Christians all the time, and it makes us cringe, but you need to know that whenever someone says that they know the date of the end of the world, you know God's not going to come on that day, because only the Father knows.

That's what Jesus says. So, what on earth has the birth of Jesus to offer us tonight? Tyrants rise and fall.

None of us know the future. None of us know 24 hours into the future. If we knew, if you knew 24 hours into the future, you could be uncalculably wealthy, and no one would be able to stop you.

[ 4 : 07 ] As we turn to this remarkable little passage that was read for us just a moment ago, these words from the prophet Isaiah that are very well known, that are read all around the world today, tonight, it speaks of the birth of a child, where God is going to make a change, which is irreversible and eternal.

And I included a little bit of the context, you see the first paragraph, to demonstrate what a time of darkness it was, when the words were first given to the prophet Isaiah.

Israel's leaders were deeply corrupt, morally, spiritually, economically, sexually. The people of God were facing ethnic cleansing from the Assyrians, and the pulpits in the land of Israel had turned away from the word of God.

Instead of consulting God about the future, the clergy had directed people to consult mediums and horoscopes and to worship their ancestors.

And the words in that first paragraph for darkness are very expressive. They speak about gloom and they imply agitation and being always under darkness so that we can't rest, we can't find even any place to rest.

[ 5 : 39 ] And there's a complete loss of hope, as though God has turned his face away. And I mention this just because I think this is a darkness that we're familiar with in our world, in our families.

And in this same context, God, the God who said let light shine out of darkness in the creation, speaks of another light, a better light, a light that is bigger than even the light of creation. Because God alone knows the future. God alone controls the future. And the lovely thing about this passage as we think about it tonight is that God tells us and shares with us and opens to us what the future is.

So, what does the birth of Jesus have to offer to us tonight? Two things. Firstly, peace. Look at verse 2.

This is the beginning of the second paragraph. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

[ 6 : 46 ] And then down in verse 6 we get a series of names of the one who's going to come. And the last name you see at the end of verse 6 is Prince of Peace. And then we read in the last verse, of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.

On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. we've looked at this idea of peace.

The Hebrew word is not like the little English, it's not a thin word. It's the word shalom. It sounds like peace, doesn't it? It's not just the absence of conflict and war and it's not just a personal psychological experience.

It means prosperity and wholeness and completeness and harmony with one another. It means soundness and happiness. Living in fellowship with God, in fellowship with one another and with ourselves in this creation and something that we work for but we always fail to achieve it and it's something that comes from outside of us from God.

And I think you would have to be very hard hearted indeed not to sense and not to be conscious that the world in which we live does not have shalom, that we don't have shalom, that we have an affliction in ourselves but that we long for this because God has made us for this peace, this prosperity, wholeness and harmony and that we're restless and we're agitated until we find it.

[ 8 : 33 ] And Isaiah tells us just as the rest of the Bible tells us, the true shalom is a gift from God that he has made us to enter into enjoying life with him and with each other and God will establish a shalom one day that is going to be perfect and just and eternal.

And the promised child is going to establish this peace and the first thing the child does is to pacify evil.

That's the point of verse 5. Every boot of the tramping warrior, every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for fire.

The way this child is going to establish peace is by destroying the accoutrements of war. He will pacify everyone committed to evil and everyone committed against God by removing their technology and cleverness.

The jackboot of cruelty, the oppression of might, the suffering of the innocent will be replaced with a peace that is based on justice and equity.

[ 9 : 48 ] Because you see, true peace, it can't be legislated, it can't be manipulated, it can't be coerced, it just can't be. You take the best laws administered by the best people with the best intentions in the world, in the end, it ends up in corruption.

We need God, we need a wonder from God. And for those of you who are Bible readers, I think that's why in verse 4 there's a reference to Midian. And Midian was a crazy victory God won in the Old Testament where instead of using the army of Israel he said, I'm going to do this and I'm going to make very sure that you see I defeat your enemies without your help.

And the idea is the child is going to institute this peace because only God can do it. And not only will he institute it but it will increase forever.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. because shalom is not a flat static stagnant thing.

Shalom is relational and it has growth infinite growth in terms of variety and intensity. I don't know if you know about this but the picture that the Bible gives of full shalom is one of increasing and growing and enlarging.

[ 11 : 16 ] I think that's the point of verse 3. You see the language God you have multiplied the nation you have increased its joy they rejoice before you as with the joy of the harvest and they are glad as they divide the spoil.

Why don't you find it a little bit frustrating maybe I'm just showing my age I find the sentiment and nostalgia in the media around Christmas deeply distressing and this is the opposite this is speaking about both objective and subjective joy of an increasing variety and of an increasing intensity because the key is that in shalom they enjoy peace before you says Isaiah before God in the presence of God that's very very important you see after evil is pacified and the blessing is received now begins a period of enjoyment in the presence of God every delight and happiness that you have now it's a gift of God but here the promise is that in shalom we don't just receive and enjoy the gift we receive and enjoy the gift and the giver we receive the gift in the presence of the giver we take delight in him as he takes delight in us we make

God happy with the enjoyment of peace that's what the birth of Jesus promises it's not more stuff it's an increase of peace it's a delight in the presence of God in that harmony and wholeness that the Bible promises it's a reminder that our purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever so in the classic literary sense Christianity is a comedy the shape of comedies has a U shaped plot line it begins happily things go bad it ends happily but Christianity is different in that where it ends is way better than where it begins beyond our imagining something new and different this is what the birth of Jesus offers us shalom peace and the second thing the passage tells us is how that peace comes to us through the prince of peace you've already sung about

I know this is very hard to believe for we very sophisticated and cynical west coasters and Maclean's magazine recently carried a review of a new book it's called the dictator's handbook why bad behavior is almost always good politics I'd like a copy if you haven't bought me something for Christmas I haven't read it but it's got great reviews it says it doesn't matter whether you're a tyrant or a democrat your basic desire as a politician is to want to stay in power and you'll do anything you can to stay in power they say that the difference between tyrants and democrats is just a convenient fiction and yet here the bible offers us a child a human child to us a child is born to us a son is given and the reason for that is that the central claim and the central miracle of Christianity is that in the manger 2000 years ago God gave us his highest gift higher than the shalom itself God the son because all the blessings that God will give us are in Jesus Christ they are found in him they are realized in him you can't separate the blessing of God from the person of Jesus Christ eternal life everlasting blessing forgiveness of sins hope new bodies you take away Christ and that all evaporates and so verse 6 gives us these five names that describe who Jesus is five names of this human baby and they are remarkable every one of the five are used elsewhere in scripture to worship God but now incredibly they are gathered together and spoken of who Jesus is so if you look at them in verse 6 in the second line his name shall be called and the first name is wonderful it's stronger than an adjective it's literally wonder the birth of

[ 16 : 06 ] Christ this baby is on the God's side of reality not the human side he's as it were something beyond our comprehension beyond our categories the wonder of Christmas this is the wonder of Christmas it's Jesus Christ because the peace that he brings far outstrips our imagination it's not merely that he's a wonderful person with a wonderful personality he himself is a wonder and I think this name comes first because it brings us face to face with the mystery of the incarnation this human child is a wonder God in the flesh secondly he's a counselor well not a therapist but the one with infinite wisdom and insight and understanding do you know if you've ever read the gospels as an adult and you should again and again and again people just are amazed with the words that pass from Jesus lips they say things like nobody ever spoke the way this man did they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips and if you could imagine the most inspiring the most brilliant the most insightful words which didn't have any self-promotion and didn't have any self-consciousness and no superficiality and no error and no presumption utter truth that's what's

like hearing

Jesus and the word counsel here is not just his words but it means he has a plan a counselor is someone who is like a planner and Jesus comes with a plan the child is born with a plan he's come to do something and to change our future to shine the light of God into our darkness he is the plan of God in a way to establish and uphold shalom wonder counselor thirdly mighty God Jesus is mighty God the word mighty is for a fighter a warrior because you see you can have a plan but unless you have the strength you're not going to bring it through to completion everlasting father for years I wondered how this could possibly apply to Jesus everlasting father surely he's the son but the big thick books tell me this can be better translated as father of eternity he's the author of eternity the baby born is born with eternity within him in his hand to give to us which is an essential part of shalom

Jesus said whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life now he gives eternal life now not just when we die and that eternal life continues through death death comes away here it is the baby possesses eternity in himself and God's plan is to share his own eternity with us through Jesus wisely tenderly and permanently and that's why finally he's called the prince of peace so what does the birth of Jesus have to offer us tonight well the peace of God the eternal shalom the prince of peace but how do I know this is not just wishful thinking and self delusion apart from the fact that God has already begun to fulfill this of course this is written 700 years before the birth of Christ but there's so much here that's not fulfilled isn't there we do not have full shalom yet you know we've seen the face of God in the person of Jesus

Christ we don't yet live in that uninterrupted fellowship and joy with God how do we know that God is going to bring it all to pass when I was a child I suppose I was nine or ten I remember vividly one Christmas Eve my parents had bought me a train set and my parents told me beforehand that they had bought me a train set which was fantastic and I can remember on that Christmas Eve hoping and wishing for that train set and thinking the world is different tonight I had that great anticipation and joy and the next day I did get the train set and it wasn't long until it broke down never worked properly again and it's probably filling some landfill somewhere how do we know God is not like that that he's not going to disappoint us well the passage gives us two things just two things as we finish the first is the last phrase which says the zeal of the

Lord of hosts will do this you ever think about God as having zeal the word is from fire he is inflamed with a great desire that we should know his shalom that he should share his shalom with us and he's greatly concerned that we enter into the joy of the Lord God's zeal will do it and the second clue is in verse 6 that very famous phrase the government shall be upon his shoulder all human leaders at some time or other and eventually become a burden on their followers but Jesus is different he doesn't live at our expense in some opulent palace he dies so that we might live the government shall be upon his shoulders he very literally shoulders our burdens all the things in our lives and in our world that would destroy and devastate shalom he bears them he bears our sin as he's raised on the cross he dies in our place and he literally makes peace by the blood of his cross and then the God of peace raised him from the dead showing that

[ 22 : 25 ] Jesus is our peace I heard recently that there's a book doing the rounds of the philosophy departments at French universities I haven't read it my friend tells me this book by his name is Luke Ferry Learning to Live Philosophy Teaches You How to Live and he explores five world views he articulates them and then he critiques them and the middle world view is Christianity and he outlines it pretty accurately but when he comes to critique it he's got only one criticism of Christianity and that is it's too good to be true so he dismisses it and I wonder whether tonight you might feel a little bit like Luke theory and I want to direct all of us finally to that verse six the first couple of words to us child is born to us a son is given he's given to us he's a gift

God has given to us because that birth has everything to do with you and me and like the hymns in this service and like this time of year there is great invitation for us to receive this gift so in a moment we're going to stand and sing joy to the world and we sing let earth receive her king let every heart prepare him room and as we sing it remember Jesus Christ was born for you so let's stand and sing this wonderful hymn together pouring and out youúa heavenly recht going in a clean powder your your caminho s■■■ Either answering any day or