

Hope Conquers Despair

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to look back this evening for a little while at Isaiah, particularly chapter 11, but we're going to introduce it by doing a little bit of a whistle-stop tour through some of the earlier verses.

And if you're reading Isaiah, if you've read Isaiah, if you've looked at Isaiah, it's a... Well, maybe you're different from me, but I find that a hard read.

There's a lot in Isaiah that's really hard to read. And when we read through it, when you read maybe two or three chapters like the ones that we mentioned today from chapter... middle of chapter 9 through to chapter 12, it's really difficult for us.

And so far removed from modern life, there seems to be so much judgment, and that's quite hard. And there's also so much detail. Why does God go into so much detail here?

And why do we need that? Well, I think one of the answers is that it's real life. One of the important answers is that Isaiah, God is dealing with real nations and real countries and real life.

[1 : 0 5] And you know, in real life, sometimes there's a lot of detail. It's not all just skimming the surface. Sometimes there's real detail. And so sometimes God is trying to get across something very important because it's real.

And if you are a mum and dad or a mum or dad, and your daughter gets married and she ends up in a really toxic relationship, who is a drugs dealer, and you see it as a pain, you warn her.

She makes excuses, she hides the bruises, and she lies about why she needs money for food. One good week in the home and everything seems to be fine. But you use a pain.

You can see the sparkle has gone from her eyes, the deadness that's there, the skeletal frame, the misery of the kids. You warn her in detail because you love her.

You tell her the door's always open for her to come back. And you never stop that as a parent. You'll never stop declaring these details, even with a sense of great helplessness.

[2 : 1 4] Or maybe sometimes for me as a pastor, dealing with a despairing alcoholic, when I'm picking out of the gutter once more, their clothes soaked in their own filth, and you speak to them in love and you say, look, the next time it'll be your funeral.

Because that's real life, isn't it? And that's what it's like sometimes for us. And that's really what's happening here is that God is speaking to real nations and to real people.

And He does so because He can see the whole picture and He sees what's happening and He is warning them. Now there's... These are only illustrations and of course they fall short in so many different ways.

They're only shadowy illustrations and you'll pick out lots of ways in which they don't... they're not parallel. So there are... They are illustrations but of course there are striking differences to the general theme of Isaiah that we come across and we recognize.

The first is that God is not helpless. God is absolutely powerful. And He is speaking into a situation with all His sovereignty and with all His power.

- [3 : 25] Takes Him, you know, out of our league altogether. And He's saying to the nations, He's saying to Israel and He's saying to Judah, He's saying, look, I know it's all in front of me. It's all before me, He says, and I know how it pans out. More than that, He's saying, you know, He's orchestrating even their failure and their rebellion and all the mystery that it has for us.
- It's all in His plan, He's saying, in a total revelation of His sovereign mind-blowing control yet without denying their responsibility.
- So it speaks of power, not helplessness. But it also does speak of judgment because He wants them to see the danger of turning their backs on Him, covenantally and also just generally.
- He's declaring to them and to us because it's not that different that bad choices bring just consequences against us. And that's an act of mercy, isn't it?
- [4 : 32] It's because He loves humanity that He does this and He wants them to recognize. And us to recognize that going alone, turning our backs on God is always bad news.
- We'll always bring judgment into our lives. However tempting that is for us and it is tempting for us all. But within that justice that He speaks of, there's also hope.
- He promises and He makes clear that He wants to redeem, that He loves, that He has a purpose in a plan through even all that's happening to make sure that our remnant are saved and kept and protected from which Jesus, the Messiah, would come.
- The shoot, the root and then the fruit. We'll get that somewhere into it this evening. Okay. So there are shadowy similarities but there's also striking differences.
- I just want to quickly speak about Israel's... Because I think it's important, I know you'll need to work a wee bit, you'll need to stay with me.
- [5 : 40] It's not just gentle, simple necessarily stuff but I think it's important and good to just grasp what is why it's here and then we'll finish off with looking at Jesus as He's prophesied here.
- But if you have your Bibles, chapter 9 from verse 8 of chapter 9, there's a heading and it says, judgment on arrogance and oppression and that's judgment on Israel.
- And we have the reasons why God is judging them because we have an insight here into God's mind and why God brings His just judgment on the people.
- And we know it because the section is divided into four and we know it's divided into four because there's a refrain, there's a sentence that is repeated four times and it's summarizing each of the four little blocks that God is speaking about.
- So if you look at verse 12, it says, the end of it, for all His anger has not turned away and His hand is stretched out still. And then in verse 17, it says the same, for all this His anger has not turned away, His hand is stretched out still.
- [6 : 53] In verse 21, it says, for all this His anger has not turned away and His hand is stretched out still. And then in chapter 10 and in verse 4 it says, for all this His anger has not turned away and His hand is stretched out still.
- So we've got this refrain, it's almost like a song, it's like a chorus and it's reminding us of four things, four areas where God is bringing judgment on Israel. And very quickly, these are, firstly, they're living in a make-believe world.
- Chapter 9 and verse 10, they're about to be, in other words, they're about to be conquered by Assyria. And although that's happening, they say, the bricks may have fallen but we have built with dress stones.

The sycamores have been cut down but we will put cedars in their place. They're living in a cloud cuckoo land. They're living in a world that isn't real, living in make-believe. They think this judgment of my city is not really going to come and even though the buildings are broken down and the trees are chopped down, they'll just plant more trees, make-believe.

There is bad leadership in the second section. The elder and the honored man is the head, verse 15, the prophet who teaches lies is in the tale. For those who guide his people have been leading them astray and those who are guided by them are swallowed up.

[8 : 10] Still was guilty of bad leadership. God exposes that, that they're living in a cloud cuckoo land, that they have bad leadership. The third section is verse 21 which speaks about Manasseh and Ephraim and devouring one another and fighting against Judah.

So all the God's people were fighting against one another. So there's disunity. And the last thing in the fourth section, chapter 10, from which there's all these refrains, is the sin of injustice.

Woe to those who decree, iniquities decrees and the writers who keep on writing oppression. So four things that tell us a little bit about the mind of God and why He's bringing judgment.

They're not living in the real world. They're cursed with bad leaders. They're disunited and they're fighting among themselves and they're not living in a just way.

These all apply today. These all tell us about the character of God and remind us of what God loves and what God hates and how we are to recognize the significance of His truth, of His believers being united together, of getting rid of bad leaders, get rid of us for bad, and watch out if you're a leader because there's a greater responsibility to lead humbly before God and also to seek justice.

[9 : 41] These are important things that we're reminded of. And God is judging them and He's judging His own covenant people because they've turned their backs on Him and they're living in this riotous way by bringing the great nation of Syria.

He's using the Assyrian people to conquer and enslave them. Chapter 10 verse 5 says, Ah, Syria, the rod of my anger, the staff in their hands is my fury.

And so He does send Assyria to enslave the people of Israel. God chooses to use even His enemies to meet out judgment.

They are not autonomous. And what I want you to note from that, just that very sort of quick spin through what's happening, I want you to note that history reveals that it happened exactly as God declared.

Okay? So just remember that. That what happened here is a prophecy from Isaiah and it happened in history just as he prophesied.

[10 : 47] And then secondly and very briefly, if you notice in chapter 10 from verse 5, there's a heading there as well and it says, Judgment on Arrogant Assyria.

So even though Assyria were used by God to judge covenant people, they themselves were under God's judgment because they thought their strength was all up to them and they became hugely proud and significant.

So that section right through to verse 19 is about judgment on Assyria for their pride and it's maybe summarized in verse 12. I know I'm making you work tonight. I know, I know.

Stick with it. Verse 12, When the Lord had finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes.

So despite their power and despite their conquering might and what they did to the people of Israel and in bringing them into captive, bringing them under their conquering power, God also judges Assyria for their pride and arrogance for thinking that they were autonomous from him.

[12 : 02] And that could be the same of any superpower today, whether it's militarily or economically, powers and nations and leaders that think that they are autonomous.

I think they can invade other nations quite the thing and they will not be held to account for it and that power and might and economic wealth is all that matters. Well, just remember and note, as we noted with Israel, note with Assyria, history reveals it happened as God declared it would.

They were judged. They were taken over by another might and power, the mighty nation of Babylon and the empire of Babylon. And we find that repeatedly through Scripture and repeatedly through history.

God's declarations, God's prophecies of what would happen happens. Now, does that change the way you read the Bible?

Does it change what you think about God's own judgment of our own hearts and of what he says about the future that is still to happen? Because if he's trustworthy then and history reveals that, then surely we should have more trust in him as we recognize the word is declared.

[13 : 24] So he judges Israel, he judges Assyria, but we also see from verse 20 of chapter 10, another heading, the remnant of Israel will return.

And there's this recognition that despite his judgment, despite the rebellion of his own covenant people and turning their backs on his love and on his grace, he's kept some equally deserving of judgment but who are recipients of his mercy and who are those who turn back to the living God because he has this people who must be the womb of the Messiah, who must be the people from whom the Messiah comes and who must point us towards the Messiah.

There's nothing that they have done in and of themselves to merit the mercy and grace of God. It's his mercy that's promised and given.

And that's always a reminder to us. We don't come to God and to grace on the basis of our own goodness or that we deserve it and they don't.

Jeremiah 9 reminds us of that. This is what the Lord says, let not the wise boast in their wisdom or the strong boast in their strength, the rich boast in their riches, but let the one boast only about this, that they have the understanding to know me that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.

[14 : 55] Therefore one contains one, it's written, let no one who boasts only boast in the Lord. So that remnant of those who are saved are the ones from whom the Messiah will come.

That brings us to chapter 11. I know it's a whistle-stop tour, I recognise that. And we're only really scratching the surface. But what we have in chapter 11 is a prophecy of the coming Messiah.

It says, there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse. So all that's left of Jerusalem, all that's left of Judah is this stump as it were, a remnant, a few following God's judgment on them.

But from that stump will come a shoot and a branch from His roots shall bear fruit. And we know that because it's taken in the New Testament and it's a picture that fits throughout the Old Testament of the coming Messiah, a righteous seed, it's spoken of back in Isaiah chapter 6.

It's also spoken of in Galatians 3 where it says, the promises were spoken to Abraham to his seed, Scripture does not say, and to seeds, meaning many people, but unto your seed, meaning one person who is Christ.

[16:16] So the seed, the shoot, this root that comes from the stump of Jesse, that is the father of David, the nation, the great king from whom the greater king, David is to come, is Jesus Christ.

And so this section speaks about who Jesus Christ is, and it says that this Christ who comes, this shoot who comes from the stump of Jesse, this branch whose roots shall bear fruit is the one who holds the sevenfold spirit of God in him, spirit of the Lord, of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of might, of knowledge, and the fear of the Lord.

He'll be perfectly infilled with the spirit of God, the Savior who comes to be our Messiah, this divine Redeemer.

And we have the great picture there very quickly of his character, this Jesus, this Messiah who's coming, who's filled with the spirit of the Lord, who's divine, who has wisdom and understanding, knowing his Father perfectly, and understanding his Father's ways perfectly, who has counsel and might, which really, it's kind of the language of military leadership, you know, it says in verse 5, that righteousness shall be the belt of his waist and faithfulness, the belt of his loins, it's a militaristic picture.

And he has the counsel and might of a spiritual military leader who knows exactly the course of action to take in order to win the war, the spiritual war that he's coming to wage against sin and death and evil and destruction and hell.

[18:10] He knows that the cross and the resurrection is the only way to go. And he has that knowledge and fear of the Lord, that perfect understanding and relationship with his Father as his incarnate Son.

He's all the things we can't be. He is all the power that we don't have. He's all the wisdom and the grace and the knowledge that enables him to be a Redeemer, and makes him unique and different from us.

That is who we see and we recognize here as the Messiah who is Spirit-filled.

It throws us forward to Mark chapter 1. If you remember, we looked at a few weeks ago when his public ministry begins and the Spirit descends on him and God the Father says, this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased as the Spirit-filled, sevenfold spiritual reflection of the Father.

And also what is spoken of by Jesus himself in Luke chapter 4 where he quotes Isaiah later on in 61, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor.

[19:28] So this anointed Messiah, this anointed Savior is prophesied and spoken of here, which we know history reveals it happened.

Is it declared that God declared it would? We find constantly the importance of matching the prophecies of the Old Testament with the reality.

And there's many prophecies in the Old Testament of the coming Messiah and many of them in Isaiah itself, the greatest of course being Isaiah 53. And it's a hugely significant thing to remember that that hundreds and hundreds of years before the Christ came, God had it all laid out in front of him.

And he knew exactly, sovereignly, his purpose and plan for the redemption of his people for them and for us. And as we celebrate the Lord's Supper shortly, we remember that history reveals that it happened exactly that God said it would.

That we as followers of Jesus are not those who deserve his mercy. We are unworthy of his mercy, but we are not worthless.

[20 : 46] We have find our worthiness and our hope and our identity and our belonging in Jesus Christ and in his beautiful gospel. It's good news that Jesus is the one who was anointed to bring that news to the poor.

And as we recognize our poverty, we come to receive the riches of his forgiveness and his grace. And whatever else happens for you this week as a believer, that is an amazing truth.

It's an amazing reality that we often forget and we often treat lightly and we often take for granted. And I hope the Lord's Table is a great place just for a few moments reflect on and remember this Old Testament prophecy that speaks forward to the coming of the Messiah.

And I just want to finish because we've only really dipped in it this evening to remind ourselves of the layers of revelation and how they fit in with life and time and even the future.

So we've seen thus far that history has revealed that what God prophesied, it happens as exactly He declared.

[22 : 12] Now, we just finish off with a little section that points forward, even beyond our lives. So rather than looking back and seeing that it's been fulfilled, we're called to have faith and to believe and rejoice that this is still to happen and to take great confidence in it because of everything that we know in our hearts as believers about Jesus and all that His Word declares.

Because what we have here is a prophecy in chapter 11, the verses that we read, and it's the first section is a prophecy about Jesus coming, but the second prophecy is pointing forward to a time that is still to happen.

So a lot of the commentators talk about this as prophetic foreshortening. So you have two prophecies together and they look like they're happening at the same time, but it's a bit like looking at a mountain from a distance.

And when you get to the mountain and you climb up the first bit, you realise that it's not actually the peak. There's a big trough and you've got to go and climb again to get to the top.

And that's just, as you look at a mountain, that's sometimes what you see. The two peaks look together, but when you actually get to the first peak, there's a big valley, Glen, before you can climb the second peak, prophetic foreshortening.

[23 : 39] So sometimes when two prophecies are together in the Bible and we're given to Isaiah in that form, it's speaking of two different events and with a timescale between them.

And this second beautiful little picture speaks of the future from verse 6, the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down in the young goat, the calf in the lion, pictorial language we have here, the fattened calf together, the little child together with them, and so on until verse 9, they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the water covers the sea.

That's the picture of the future. And isn't it good to do it tonight? Because the Lord's Supper is looking back, but it also is looking forward. So we look forward as Christians to what we have yet to enjoy, what has yet to come.

This is a fantastic glimpse of the future. I mean, Isaiah 65 makes it really clear for us because Isaiah 65 repeats this section about the animals, and it does so in the context of the new heavens and the new earth.

And that's exactly what's been spoken about here, is that Jesus comes and He comes to call a people to Himself and He comes to take us home.

[25 : 01] This isn't our home. Our home is yet to be enjoyed and revealed in the new heavens and the new earth with Jesus Christ.

Being with Him in a city, in a place where righteousness dwells. And we have yet a picture of that here, a beautiful picture for us.

And it speaks of important spiritual truths. It speaks of the reconciliation of old hostilities, the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the young goat who in this world, this broken world, this world under God's judgment, attack and destroy one another.

These old hostilities will be gone. Now I believe it's real. It's also simple. It's not just talking about animals. But yeah, there will be animals for sure.

Not redeemed animals, but new creations. But the whole nature will be different, won't it? There'll be reconciled, the hostilities will have gone.

[26 : 12] There'll be changed natures, at least in the animal kingdom. They'll eat the same food, and they'll eat the same food together. There'll be herbivore, not carnivore once more, as the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, gray, the cow and the bear grays and their young lie down together.

Different world, different kind of world, a world where also the curse is removed between the seed and the snake, where the child can play the whole of the cobra and the weaned child can put his hand on the adder's den, where that curse of division between the serpent and the child, the most vulnerable of humanity, is gone.

No more tension, no more destruction, no more tears, no more toil, no more death. We have that described variously in different parts of the Bible. All that our deepest hearts long for, all that we crave and we look for in idolatry or in wishful filming or whatever it might be, we find in Christ in what lies ahead.

We taste it now, it's in shadow now, we know peace now, but it's only the best is still to come. Peace and holiness, no destroying, no destruction, no death, the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

So that same picture of the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. That's our home. And that's what we look forward to.

[28 : 00] And that's what we're to call to remember as we participate in the Lord's Supper. It's not just a remembrance of the past. It's until He come because He's yet to come and take you home.

He's yet to come and call us all to dwell in His new society. But we are to reflect that now in the kind of unity and the justice and the humble love with which we serve Him in this world as those touched by His grace.

And if you're not a Christian, what is your future hope at best beyond this life? What is it?

What can we hold on to? What is permanent and secure and real, as real as this? Which is already, He's all God is saying, in His mercy, I've already proven it.

It's the only way. Like a loving Father, He said, I had to expose this sin and the rebellion because it's so dangerous, but also I became the one who bore it.

[29 : 08] I took it all so that you might be gifted mercy and freedom. It's great good news. And we find it in sometimes the most difficult and hardest texts that we read in the Old Testament.

So please remember who we are and who we serve and what the invitation and the challenges for each of us this evening. Let's pray.

Father, help us, we ask to understand you and know you better through your word. We recognize there's many bits of your word that are really difficult to understand.

But we also remember that you're a great, beautiful, glorious, sovereign, merciful, loving God. And may we not live our lives in the shadow.

May we not live our lives running from you. They're back turned in pride or in the dreadful deceit of thinking we know better than you.

[30 : 13] Give us that humility as children to know that as a loving Father you have absolutely got the best for us. That you have a future that is beyond our wildest imagination and yet will satisfy every craving of our human being to the infinite degree.

So Lord, help us to look back with thanksgiving as we celebrate the Lord's Supper and look forward with anticipation this evening. We ask it in your precious name. Amen.