

Out of Darkness, Light

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[0 : 0 0] So we're going to turn to Isaiah chapter 9 tonight. That's going to be the main passage I want to focus on. And this short section, really from verse 2 to the end of verse 7.

Now, I think if you were to be somebody who trusted in human progress, you would be struggling in 2015 after the year that we've just had.

Many people who believe that humanity can work itself out and can cooperate in order to get better and make a better life would have to say that 2015 has been a disaster on many counts.

We look back on this year with great sadness for many reasons. Many things have happened throughout the world that cause great grief and that are almost unbearable to remember.

And so the darkness in the world, if you believe in the progress of humankind, seems kind of inexplicable. How can we still be making such a mess of things we should have learned from the 20th century, which was apparently the bloodiest of all?

[1 : 1 3] Now, in the context of this chapter, for the recipients of Isaiah's message, they were to receive, and they had already received in the earlier chapters, news of judgment and of terrible times ahead.

So in the context here, the Northern Kingdom, who had rebelled against God and had continually flouted warnings and gone against what God had advised them to do, they had received news that God was going to deal with them, bad news, because the Assyrians were going to come and deal a great blow against them as a nation.

I mean, you maybe know something of that from the history of God's people and the horror that would come upon them, even God's people. And I think in some ways it's even worse for them because they should have known better.

People who had been set apart by God as His people, He had spoken to them, He had laid out before them the way that He wanted them to be.

And yet so often they'd gone so wrong. And so we get to the point in the previous chapter in Isaiah 8, where we read in verse 5, Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloh that flow gently and rejoice over risen in the Son of Rimaliah, therefore behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river, mighty in many, the king of Assyria and all his glory.

[2 : 4 2] And we get this kind of picture language that speaks of the judgment that is coming against God's people. So these people, the Jews, are facing a time of devastation and a time where they will be like many refugees we've witnessed this year who've kind of cried out in the darkness for good news.

Where does our hope come from? How can we possibly be saved from this situation? So, it's remarkable when we read a chapter like this, and actually when you read through a book like Isaiah, when there's so much warning of judgment that is certain to come and so much darkness because of the state of their own hearts and the judgment that will come upon them, that there is also so much talk of light and hope and salvation that God says.

Almost interweaved with the judgment that is to come, God's saying to them, yet I will bring salvation and yet I have light for you out of this dark time.

And so I want to speak, the title I gave this sermon is Out of Darkness Light and in many ways we have the Gospel prefigured in this chapter and I want to just open that up a little bit tonight.

I have three headings. I want us to see as we look at the start of this chapter, the celebration and then the middle section is all about liberation and the final few verses are the explanation.

[4 : 07] How is it possible that we can have this sense of light and hope when there is so much talk of judgment and darkness? First of all, celebration.

Let me read these first two verses of Isaiah chapter 9. You see, at the end of chapter 8, he's spoken about the judgment that is to come and if I just read from verse 21, they will pass through the land greatly distressed and hungry.

When they were hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their god and turn their faces upwards and they will look to the earth but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

And then we read verse 1, but there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. So immediately you see the contrast there. Immediately you see the ray of light that is given in the prophecy.

And in verse 2, we read of the celebration, this joy that comes to these people. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwell in a land of deep darkness on them light has shown.

[5 : 14] You get the repetition that is so common in this Hebrew poetry, the way they often emphasise things was through repetition in order to emphasise and further the point that they're making.

And isn't that such a joyful thing to read and an inexplicable thing to read when we've just read of this great trouble and this great darkness that is going to come?

So a contrast with the message that's just come, but it's biblically consistent, isn't it? And the way through the Bible and the narrative of the message of what God has done and is doing for His people is news of judgement and the right condemnation of evil in the heart of men and women and news of hope and light.

You go right back to Genesis 3 after the fall, the terrible mess that Adam and Eve had made and then people continued to make and yet God promised in that early chapter in chapter 3 of hope that the serpent Satan would be crushed.

And we read as we go into the start of John's Gospel, he uses this picture, this imagery of light and darkness, doesn't he? To express the darkness that does exist in the world that nobody can deny, not even anybody who doesn't believe in God, the darkness that does exist in the world and yet the light that comes from the Gospel.

[6 : 40] Let me read verse in John chapter 1, I'll just turn there. Verse 4, in him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

And if you go on and read through that chapter, that theme, that image is developed and what that image wants to speak about which is the light of the Gospel of Jesus shines as the glory of the Gospel out of the darkness of the situation of people's hearts.

The Gospel that God is declaring in Jesus. Now often if we go into verse 3, often when we think about the context here again, the judgment that came upon God's people, the way that first of all the southern and then the northern kingdoms were exiled and were destroyed and were afflicted by different people who came on them, we think of the terrible sadness that they endured and that they wrote about.

You think about a book like Lamentations and the sense of loss and desperation. The expression in that book of how we were God's people, we were in His holy land and now we are here in a foreign country and we're not able to worship as we did and our identity is stripped away almost completely.

There's that sense of lament and mourning for loss and so it's strange when we think about how God's people were kind of decimated to read what we did in verse 3.

[8 : 09] Again, thinking about the celebration, the sense of joy here. Look at what it says in verse 3. You have multiplied the nation. Notice nation, not nations. There's that sense of unity again being spoken of of God's people.

You've multiplied the nation. So there's a hint even there. Again, thinking again of the hints of gospel, of the big picture work that God is going to do, of the progress that God will bring of His people as we look into the New Testament era and the growth of the church, which makes us go back to the first little verse in this chapter where it speaks about at the end of verse 1, the land beyond the Jordan Galilee of the nations, where we get a hint there again of the broadening of God's picture, not just to His people the Jews, but to the nations.

And so even in verse 3 here, we have this sense of celebration and joy being spoken of again. You've multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. How is that possible?

He's just been speaking about judgment and the darkness that will engulf the land. And so what we have to recognize, I think, when we read a passage like this, is that the joy that is being spoken of, the people who are rejoicing here, the people who see a light, aren't creating this by themselves.

You know, they're not simply making the best of life, kind of banding together and having a good go of it. They haven't worked out some new philosophy that solved all their problems.

[9 : 39] This is a message of hope that is being given to them, is being proclaimed to them by God, despite themselves, despite all of their failings, despite all of their weaknesses.

And so this is a message that speaks to us just again as we think about the way that it links with what we understand of the Gospel and of all the way that God works throughout His salvation history of the work that He has done despite the mess that humanity makes.

Despite the mess that you and I make, we know that, don't we? You know the frustration of yourself, the deception of your own heart sometimes, the way you go in circles with things and feel like you never actually get any progress, even in your Christian life.

And yet this speaks of what God has done and how He will bring light and those who have walked in darkness. And that's us also, isn't it, of course? We know that so well, as I've said from passages like John, which speak of the light.

And I also want to say, just before we leave this couple of verses, notice the way that this is prophecy, but it speaks of what will happen as if it had happened. So you get this in a few different lines.

[10 : 53] Let me just read some of the lines and then you'll see how there is a certainty here and a sense of celebration. And again, how it's based not on something that is a wishful thinking, but it's based on the certainty of God's promises.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Now ultimately, this points, this is, if you like, going forwards to the Gospel and to the one who would come, which we'll see as we go through this passage, but there's a certainty there, isn't there?

Those who dwell in a land of deep darkness on them light has shone. You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. There was much darkness to come for this nation, much judgment to come because their hearts were still unrepentant.

And yet even here we get this certainty, this promise, because it's the work of God, because it's pointing forward to the assurance of what he would do.

So there is, first of all, celebration, even despite the darkness. Verse 4 and 5, we get partially an explanation of how this is and we see that it involves liberation.

[12 : 11] We talked about celebration, now we're talking about liberation. And you notice that immediately, verse 4 starts with 4. So in other words, it's kind of explaining. We have this feeling of how is this possible?

Well, verse 4 introduces it with, for the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. So what's this talking about?

This is used in language that would have been very important and significant and a great blessing to people in such a context as this.

Because these are people who are in darkness, who are facing judgment and oppression, and it speaks of a sense of liberation. And what it does is it uses echoes of things from the people of God's history, if you like, reminding them of ways in which they had been in bondage and in trouble, and yet God had liberated them.

So it's if you like calling back into their collective history and identity and saying, remember who you are and where you've been and the mess you've been in, and let that help you see the promise that is being spoken of here.

[13 : 26] So we get that in two ways. First of all, with regards to their slavery in Egypt. So we think back to the time when God's people were in Egypt and the oppression they faced there as they were enslaved and worked so hard under the pharaoh.

The language that's here used it, the yoke of his burden, the staff speaking about the staffs that were used in the way they were worked hard, and the rod that was potentially used to beat them, the rod of his oppressor, all trigger words if you like.

They would cast their minds back to the terrible oppression they faced. And then the reference in the last line of verse 4, you've broken as on the day of Midian, where I read from Judges.

The scenario that it was describing in Judges, if you didn't pick it up, is where God's people faced this great oppressor who seemed like they would overcome them, but through Gideon and the small number of soldiers that he commanded, God fought for his people and freed them from that great oppression.

From the threat that they faced, they were going to get destroyed. They were going to get wiped out. But God was with them. God came and spoke to Gideon and assured him, you know, despite all the odds, Gideon, despite what it looks like, despite the situation you face, I'm with you.

[14 : 50] And so there is this remembrance of liberation, which ties into this promise, this hope that they are being called to in the middle of this darkness, this sense of liberation.

And that reminds us, doesn't it, that God is the one who fights for his people in different situations, but primarily again in the big picture of what all that God is doing for us in freeing us from the greatest oppressor, which is sin, which is the thing that constantly wars against us, if you like, keeps coming back, keeps tempting us and drawing us away from God and from his goodness and from the way in which he would have us live and following effectively the lies of the accuser, who says it's better and more fun and more fulfilling to live this way.

The Gospel, the news of Jesus, frees us from that lie. It speaks to us of how empty it is. It speaks to us of how it will only destroy us, and it shows us that only in Christ, who perfectly fulfilled the fulfillment of the law, as we trust in him, only in him do we find freedom from that slavery.

So there is this wonderful sense of liberation that is spoken of in this passage, and this people who face despair are also given this message of hope, this promise of hope.

You know, if only they would trust the promises that they were given. If only you and I would trust the promises that we are given.

[16 : 43] And notice again, just before we leave this little section here, verse 5, there's another kind of hint looking forward to the Gospel and the truth of the reality of the Gospel.

Verse 5 speaks of victory. So we've had liberation, but there's also this sense of victory. Remember I said that God fights for his people. He is for them.

Often in the Old Testament that is spoken about in physical conquest and battle and all the rest of it. But here's the reality and the necessity of war and the victory that it produces because God fights for his people, there is still mention of peace. And we're going to come and see that peace is so significant in this chapter.

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. So in other words, there will come a time where there will be an end of this need for battle.

God is the one who will fight for his people and who will win the victory. And we know also, don't we, that looking ahead into the New Testament and of the hope that we have for the future and of heaven, we read of a place where there will be no more tears, there will be no more warring of people against each other, where there will be peace.

[18 : 09] God will be able to bring his people to himself, having won the victory in Jesus. And so he will bring us, he will come to dwell with us and there will be peace.

So there is even in this time where their Israelites are facing a fight, if you like, they're going to be attacked, there's going to be all this destruction, there is this talk of liberation and there is this talk of victory and peace.

Third point, so we've seen the celebration and part of the explanation in the liberation that is described here. And finally, as I said, the kind of final explanation.

And this is really the core of what we're looking at here and it really brings into focus how this is possible. How is it possible for Isaiah to prophesy from God of this light in the middle of this darkness?

Nothing that they could do, nothing that they could work out for themselves. Verse 6, it simply says, for, again see that again, for this is possible because to us a child is given.

[19 : 25] Now if you were here this morning, we looked at this again, didn't we? And this is so much of the focus at this time of year. It's the focus all the time because it's about Jesus. So it's always our glad focus.

But we remember at this time that the hope was given in the person of Jesus who came as a baby. And that is the hope. That is the reason why there can be this talk of hope, of light, of freedom and of liberation.

The certain hope that is spoken of here. Notice that what is spoken of here is a child is born to us, a son is given. Again, that language that speaks of the fact that this is God's doing.

He is the one who gladly does this. He has always planned to do it. He mentions it here in Isaiah. There are different prophecies of this and then we see the fulfillment of that when we come to the Gospels. This is something that God has done.

He has given his son to be the Saviour. And we get a reflection of that again just if you skip to the end of this little section of verse 7, just to reassure us, to reassure the people here and us.

[20 : 30] How is this possible? Well, the end of verse 7, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. God is the one who fights for his people. God is the one who has appointed his people and who has set them apart, who has a plan for them.

And so because he has a plan for them and he is able to fulfill his plan, he will do it. And we are those who look back on all these prophecies and look back on all that is spoken of of God's purposes.

And we see the fulfillment of it in Jesus. And we are able to bless God and praise God as we look back on the fulfillment of promises such as this.

So this here is the explanation of how this is possible. As a child is born to us, as a son is given, and now the passage simply goes on to kind of overflow with a kind of beautiful description of who is this child, who is this one who is spoken of, what will he be like, what will he do, what is his character, why can we be so at peace knowing that he is the one who is promised by God.

I want to focus, you'll notice that it speaks of in verse 6 the government that he will hold, if you like, an uphold. And at the end of verse 6 it speaks of different characteristics and I really want to just pick out one of these.

[21 : 53] We could spend a long time meditating on all these different descriptions of who this child will be, this promised one. But I want to focus on this one description, at the end of verse 6 it says, wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Let's just pick out Prince of Peace tonight. Remember the context for these people receiving this message of darkness and gloom and fear and oppression and sin and mess.

And everything that separated themselves from each other, the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom and the different alliances that were going on historically, all the problems and all the warring and all the fighting and the dissonance between them and God, the prophecies that kept coming to them and reminding them of who God was and how he called them back to himself and yet there was always that tension and that dissonance.

And here we have this description of the one who is promised who would be able to effect this liberation. He is the Prince of Peace.

That's really important for us to consider and to remember in our dark world with all of its problems and terror and fear that the one who we trust in, the one who is promised, the one who came and who fulfilled all the promises, is the Prince of Peace, who now reigns.

[23 : 21] Now let's just think for a minute about what we mean by peace. Lots of people mean lots of different things by peace. We don't mean a general sense of being relaxed.

The movement in the 60s would say peace and they just mean be chilled out and just everybody love each other. And that was very undefined as it kind of worked out actually. It's very hard to actually work out what that actually means.

It's very hard to do and that's the other problem isn't it? Isn't it so hard for humans to live at peace? Our ideology is that we just love everybody and it never seems to work.

We even feel when we go into the office at the start of a new week, I'm just going to really love that person who really annoys me but it's so hard. We never quite feel like we're at peace with that person.

So this isn't speaking of one who would come and just say hey you should just accept everybody and just be nice to them and love them. I was thinking of the movement, the kind of wellness movement.

[24 : 27] I came across this description online, I thought it was very interesting. And it describes this guy who first coined this phrase wellness.

Not having a go at wellness as such but let me just read this little description. It's quite important. This guy, Halbert Dunn, began using the phrase high level wellness in the 1950s.

And listen to this definition. He defined wellness as an integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable.

In other words, what that's really saying is we have to do it. We have to work really hard at achieving our potential and being at peace and all of the rest of it.

And again, to me that is a huge burden, hugely hard to do, nigh on impossible. He goes on to say it requires that the individual maintain a continuum of balance and purposeful direction within the environment where he is functioning.

[25 : 34] I'm not trying to belittle people's attempts to make good of their lives at all. But this passage speaks of one who is the Prince of Peace.

He is given to us. And how does that work? How is that different from the definition that I've just read there? Well, we have to work really hard at maintaining this sense of equilibrium.

Well, he is the one who proclaims peace to us as we trust in him because he is the one who has satisfied every demand of the law. And so as we trust in him, we are accepted in his name.

And so we receive peace with God. We can't earn it. We just remind ourselves of that again, don't we? He proclaims peace.

He has purchased this sense of peace because of the work that he accomplished on the cross. But he also is the one who brings peace between God and man, but also amazingly, if we think, within the church, between men and women, all different kinds of backgrounds and peoples and races, especially, let me just read very briefly in a passage in Ephesians, where it speaks about the peace of the unity as well that is brought between Jew and Gentile.

[26 : 58] So again, God's purposes were bigger than just for the people he's speaking of here, just for the Jewish people. But of course, his gospel was to be for all the nations. And we have this great bringing together of people from all nations into his peace, into his family.

So we read in Ephesians chapter 2, let me just read from verse 14. He himself is our peace, Jesus, who has made us both one. Now this is speaking in the context of how Jew and Gentile are one in Christ.

He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commands expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. So in God's purposes again, in the church is this great sense of peace and unity and oneness in Christ.

And of course, as we've thought about, recently as we were looking at the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 and 6, as Jesus preaches his sermon and as he embodies and preaches of the kingdom, what he teaches is of an ethic, a life that is a life of peace, blessed are the peacemakers.

[28 : 29] And we know also from later in the Bible, as I've already mentioned, the peace that is the promise for God's people that they look forward to a time of genuine peace, a time when all will be right and when sin will be away and we will see, we will behold the glory of the Son and we will be with him.

So he is the Prince of Peace. All of that is promised to us, his people, because of who he is, not because of anything we do. We are those who follow him. We are those who trust in him and we are those who follow him.

And so this passage brings out this, just looking at this one phrase, this wonderful certainty and assurance that God's people can have even in the midst of the darkness because of the promises that God makes.

Jesus spoke of peace himself, didn't he? As he left in John 14, he says to his disciples, they were facing uncertainty. Jesus was speaking about going to the cross. They didn't understand him.

Jesus says, peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives. He goes on to say, let not your hearts be troubled.

[29 : 46] So there is this celebration of these people, this liberation that they have and this explanation which comes from the fact that this one, this Messiah who is promised, this Son who is to be born, will be the one who will save God's people and who will be the Saviour of the world.

I said so many more things in this passage about him. We don't have time to go into them. But let me just say two things, just as I finished. Two, if you like concluding applications. Just to touch on one of the other descriptions of Jesus, this reign, this, the reign of this prince that we're thinking about, this is permanent. In our broken world, when there's so much trouble, we often talk about, or we often see countries trying to attain a measure of peace between them.

We talk about a peace process in whatever, it would be Northern Ireland, it would be Syria, whatever, where the leaders will meet to a summit and they will bash out different deals and they will try and be reconciled to each other.

And sometimes we re-hear in the news of peace that has been reached. But we know, sadly from experience, how so often that can be so short-lived.

And it seems like there has just been a sense of peace between nations and then another, maybe world leader or situation arises which shatters that peace and some other problem comes in.

[31 : 15] And so we live in a world of uncertainty and continual brokenness. But the reign of this one is permanent.

Again at the end of verse 6, another description of him is everlasting father. Now don't confuse that father with father, son and spirit, the first person of the Trinity that speaks there, another characteristic of this one, this son who is to be born, Jesus, the fatherliness of him in his protection and his care for his people and his protection and his care is everlasting.

And so we have confidence. Again, looking at the character of this one. It goes on to say in verse 7, of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end.

So this kingdom, which is a kingdom of peace, which if you note at the start of verse 7 is expanding, of the increase of his government is one that is going on. And even now that is true, isn't it?

With all the problems in the world, God's kingdom is established and is growing and is going on. And his reign of peace is expanding.

[32 : 25] So this reign is permanent and he protects his people permanently. And so tonight, Christian, you are under the protection of the Prince of Peace permanently.

And he is your assurance. And finally, can we just remember the first point? I want to go back to the start. Remember that we started with celebration.

These were people who looked forward, even in the middle of their troubled situation, and there was talk of celebration. That's if you like the way this all starts.

All the explanation that we're looking at has come out of this description of the celebration of these people. There's great rejoicing. There is the potential for joy and for celebration. Because of the one who would come.

And so we ask the question again, as we did this morning, where our joy is as those who look back on these promises and the fulfillment of these promises and the certainty of what Jesus has done and the hope to which he has called us, are we people who walked in darkness but who have seen a great light, who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

[33 : 41] You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. We know as Christians, the life isn't easy. We still face trouble, but we are those who have joy.

Because Jesus came and fulfilled these promises. And we follow the Prince of Peace. And I want to read one final verse.

Because we sometimes find that difficult, don't we? We can't see. If only we could see Jesus. If only things were easier or more obvious. And we can forget all that the Bible speaks to us about the promises and the fulfillments of all that God has done.

So, 1 Peter chapter 1. Let me read this verse and then I'm going to finish. It says, though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him.

And you rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. Obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. And that is spoken in a context of where people are experiencing trouble.

[34 : 49] So even in the middle of trouble, when things aren't easy, when you can't see the future, when it feels like there's lots of tension, maybe when it feels like God doesn't care, we read this verse.

And we're to be those who have experienced the darkness and yet see a great light. So, I'll finish with that. Let me pray. Gracious God, we're grateful for the great blessing of your Word and the promises that we can read so often in the Bible.

We thank you for the richness of the description of this one. The child who was to be born. The Savior we know of is Jesus, the one who came and who lived and who died for us.

And the one who now is at the right hand of the Father, interceding on our behalf, knowing our names, caring for us, bringing our names before the Father.

We thank you, Lord Jesus, for your care for us. We thank you for who you are. We thank you that you're the Prince of Peace. We thank you that you're everlasting and for all that you are. And we thank you that this means that you're the one who is able and mighty to save us.

[36 : 11] Amen.