

Christmas Joy in Dark Times

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Isaiah

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Turn with me in your Bibles to the 9th chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah 9. We're going to be looking at a very familiar passage that's often read at Christmas and one of the clearest Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and a majestic passage that really unpacks for us the glory of Jesus and it's a message of joy. This was given by God to people in times of great uncertainty, times of political turmoil, social unrest, structural upheaval, from a great distress for the people of God. This prophecy came in just that moment. The hope of the Messiah and the joy that he would bring. We're going to see that there's this movement from darkness to light, from gloom to gladness, from distress to freedom, and these things happen with the coming of Christ.

We're going to look at this passage in context today. I've never really, and I preached this passage a number of times in my 27 years of pastoral ministry, but I've never actually worked through the context, and I usually do it around Christmas but I've never worked through the context quite as thoroughly as I hope to do this morning and to see the relevance. So it's really the title of the message this morning is "Christmas Joy in Dark Times." Christmas joy in dark times. This passage was given, this particular part of Isaiah, chapters 7 to 9, were given at 735 BC, so more than seven centuries before the birth of Christ, Isaiah is given this prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. In fact, in chapter 7, 7:14, you have there a familiar verse. We're not going to, well, we will read it at some point but that the Messiah will be born of a virgin and his name will be called Immanuel, that's 7:14, but then in chapter 9:1-6 we have the beauty of the coming of the Messiah, that he does bring light, he's a great light, he brings gladness instead of gloom, and he brings freedom instead of slavery and distress.

So Christmas joy in dark times. Let's read God's word. I want to start by reading verse 22 of chapter 8 because we're going to see this really flows right out of chapter 7 and 8, and particularly chapter 8:22 really helps set the context of the glory of this joyful message, these glad tidings. This is why the gospel is good news. The message of Jesus Christ and who he is and what he has done is the best news the world has ever heard and it continues to be the most relevant news that anyone can hear. And so the Christmas message is the most relevant message that anyone can hear today, the most needed message, and we see it here in these verses.

Chapter 8, Isaiah 8:22,

22 Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be driven away into darkness.

1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. 2 The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them. 3 You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4 For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. 5 For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult, And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire. 6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. 7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your precious word and we come today asking that You might shower Your grace upon us, that You might give us by Your Spirit eyes to see and ears to hear, hearts to repent and believe, to rest in the glorious person and work of Christ. Fill us with Your joy. Lord, do it for Your glory that we might be a people for Your possession, committed to do Your will in Your world. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So Christmas joy in dark times, in dark days, circumstances. It's really interesting about this passage, I mentioned it came 735 BC. Isaiah's ministry began 740 BC, five years before this particular oracle is given to him. His ministry began with the calling that he experienced in Isaiah 6 where he sees the Lord. He goes to the temple, he sees the Lord in all of his glory, and Isaiah then is called to the prophetic ministry. He was already a religious man. He was at the temple, after all, worshiping God, but he had an encounter with the Lord that forever changed him. He went from being a man who was externally religious to being a man who was internally supernaturally changed, transformed by the power of the Spirit.

And when he goes in 740 BC, it's interesting in chapter 6 he says, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord." In the year that King Uzziah died. Uzziah had one of the longest reigns of any of the southern kingdom of Judah, any of the kings of the southern

kingdom of Judah. Remember that Israel after the reign of David and Solomon, after the reign of Solomon the nation of Israel, the 12 tribes was divided in two, into two nations. The northern kingdom was 10 tribes, that's why they basically reclaimed, I think, the name Israel because most of Israel was with the northern kingdom, 10 tribes. The southern kingdom took the name of Judah for the two tribes of the south, Judah and Benjamin. Judah was the greater tribe, far more numerous, and so the kingdom of Judah was the name of the southern kingdom. And the southern kingdom was where Jerusalem is, the only place that you can worship God at that time in history. The temple is there. And on the throne of the southern kingdom of Judah is a Davidite, that is, a descendant of David. The messianic line is reigning in the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom is still in existence at this time, 735 BC, and in the midst of these circumstances.

So Isaiah goes to the temple in 740 in the year King Uzziah died. It was a time of uncertainty. Anytime that one king perishes and another king takes his place, there's a lot of uncertainty, what's going to happen, and it ended, as I said, one of the longer reigns in all of Judah, Uzziah. It was a very prosperous reign. In fact, Uzziah was the fourth consecutive king of the southern kingdom, when you read through 1 & 2 Kings you see this, it goes back and forth from the northern king to the southern king continually, and the kings of Israel are all bad. It's just a matter of bad to worse, that's all that you have in the northern kingdom. But the southern kingdom, you have some bad ones but you have a series of good ones too and when Uzziah died and then Jotham, his son, follows and Jotham now is getting older and now Ahaz, his son, has become a coregent with Jotham 735 BC, as Ahaz takes the throne, the four kings before him had been good kings by God's estimation. As you read through 1 & 2 Kings you'll find things like this, "He walked in the ways of his father David." That means he was a good king. And so four kings in a row had been good, basically godly kings. They weren't as good as David but they were good.

And so there had been a long period of spiritual well-being, financial prosperity, political national security, and in 735 BC things have begun to deteriorate in a significant way. First of all, Ahaz, the new king of Judah, is an ungodly man. You can read this in 2 Kings 16, the whole chapter is about Ahaz's reign, and it says about him, this southern king, remember he's one of the kings of the south following Jotham and his grandfather Uzziah, it says about Ahaz that he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He wasn't like a king of Judah, he was like a king of Israel. It was as if Ahab had somehow shown up in Judah or Jeroboam. He was an ungodly and wicked man. And so those who were faithful to the Lord knew it was a bad omen, not in the sense of omens, but it was a bad indicator of what was to come if the king of Judah was evil.

So in these times of uncertainty, things have begun to deteriorate not only spiritually but socially and politically. There is an existential threat, a very clear and present danger. The northern kingdom, remember we're talking about the southern kingdom of Judah, what's happening down here. Ahaz is the king. Isaiah is the prophet ministering to him. The people of Judah are the focus of this passage, Isaiah 9, and 7, 8 and 9. The southern kingdom is experiencing a time of real national threat. The northern kingdom of Israel has allied itself to the kingdom of the Arameans and they are working to form a

confederation that includes the other surrounding nations of Judah. The Edomites to the east, the Philistines to the west, and then Israel and the Arameans to the north are basically forming a confederation and what they're trying to do is they're trying to pressure Judah to join them because of a greater threat. They want these five nations to join together because of the greater threat of Assyria. Not Syria, Assyria. A-s-s-y-r-i-a, one of the great superpowers of the ancient world. Assyria is a malevolent superpower. They are bent on world domination and so the northern kingdom of Israel along with the kingdom of the Arameans and the other kings that I mentioned, the Edomites and the Philistines, they're aware of that threat and they're trying to band together to defend themselves against the Assyrians.

Well, Judah has been stubborn about entering into alliances like that because God had forbidden that to his people. It's wicked for the kingdom of Israel to be entering into an alliance with ungodly nations, and so it's expected that Judah won't do that and that's been the case under the godly kings before. So now they have this immediate threat of this four-kingdom alliance I mentioned, the northern kingdom of Israel, the Arameans, are now pressing down upon them and have attacked them, they've had battles where they've lost over 100,000 men, the kingdom of Judah has experienced that, and they now hear that they're again coming after them. They're forming again to come after them again and it brings them terror, and in this terror there's the temptation to either acquiesce and join their league which is what most of the people want to do, and the king is going to do them one better, he's going to go even worse than that, he's going to advocate and he's going to secretly make an alliance not with Israel and the Arameans and the Philistines and the Edomites that he shouldn't do, he's going to go one worse and seek to make an alliance with Assyria itself. Ahaz is going to do that and this is going to bring all kinds of judgment from God, and the reality was that they already needed judgment anyway and this is what we're going to see, is that the ways of God in governing the movements of kingdoms and the movements of men's hearts to accomplish his purpose, and his purpose is essentially the purification, this is God's ultimate purpose at every moment in history, listen to this, God's ultimate purpose at every moment in history is not justice among the nations, that's not his ultimate purpose, his ultimate purpose is the purity of his people. That's why God would use the Babylonians or the Assyrians or the Egyptians to do his purpose. They're doing wicked things and yet God is accomplishing the purification of a people whose hearts are his and the same thing is true in Isaiah 7-9.

The Lord is at work. He is at work to cure his people of an ungodly craving for worldly security. Think about that, an ungodly craving for worldly security. In fact, I want us to now, we're going to consider the rest of this under three main points and the first is the disease. The three points are going to be the disease, the treatment and the cure. The disease, the treatment and the cure.

The first point: the disease, and two subpoints here under this first point, the disease, and the first subpoint is the essence of the disease. The essence of the disease and you see it in chapter 7, verses 1 to 2, and chapter 8, verse 6. So let's look at chapter 7, verses 1 to 2 for a moment. Isaiah 7:1,

1 Now it came about in the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Aram and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not conquer it. 2 When it was reported to the house of David, saying, "The Arameans have camped in Ephraim," his heart and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind.

It's interesting in that first verse that Isaiah tells us that when they come up to attack Judah, they're going to wage war but they're not going to be victorious but the people don't understand that and the king doesn't understand that. When it was reported to the house of David, that is, to the king, to Ahaz, when it was reported to the people of Judah, "The Arameans have encamped in Ephraim," that is, in the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel actually when you're reading your Bible, the Old Testament, you'll often see Ephraim used interchangeably with Israel. Remember I said Israel is the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom? The reason it's sometimes called Ephraim is because Ephraim is the most numerous tribe of those 10, so Ephraim is analogous to why Judah is called Judah. Does that make sense? So he's saying when he uses this here, they're camped in Ephraim, the Arameans have camped in Israel. They're camped in the northern kingdom. They're combining their armies now again to come against them and look how the king and the people respond, "the heart and the hearts of his people," the king's heart and the hearts of his people "shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind." They are shaking, visibly shaking, terrified.

And you see in this, in their terror, how do they respond? What God is going to be calling them to is, "Repent and return to Me. That's what you do when I bring affliction is you repent and you return and you rest in who I am." But they don't do that and we see this, let's just jump ahead to chapter 8 for a moment, verse 6. I mentioned that there's a disagreement among the people and the king about what to do. King Ahaz is going to do that unspeakable thing of sending envoys to meet with the king of Assyria and then he himself is going to go meet with the king of Assyria in a few years. But the people, they don't want to form an alliance with Assyria. To them that is the greatest evil imaginable and there's a grain of truth in their thinking. It is a terrible evil. It is a greater evil than the evil they want to do but the problem is the evil they want to do is a lesser evil and it's still evil.

And you see what they want to do in chapter 8, verse 6. Verse 5 he says,

5 Again the LORD spoke to me further, saying, 6 "Inasmuch as these people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah And rejoice in Rezin and the son of Remaliah;

What he says there, they reject the waters, the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, that's a reference to who God is and his sufficiency, to his king, to his Lordship, to his protection. They reject that and instead they rejoice in Rezin and the son of Remaliah. Who are Rezin and the son of Remaliah? Well, we saw in chapter 7, verse 1, Rezin is the king of Aram, the Arameans. Pekah, the son of Remaliah, the king of Israel.

So the nation of Judah, they're like, "No, don't do that evil thing of joining with the Assyrians! That's unspeakable! That's ungodly! That's wicked! Let's make an alliance with the kings of Israel and Aram." So both are seeking to do evil. So the essence is and why are they doing that? Because they have a craving for worldly security. They are terrified at the prospects of what's happening in their lives. They see the enemy is gathering against them, they fear the loss of their prosperity, the loss of their peace, the loss of their well-being, the loss of their comfort, and they crave that worldly security and pleasure and comfort.

What are you craving right now? You know, it's not evil to desire comfort and security, not to desire it at all, I mean, it's reasonable to desire it, but the idea of craving is wanting it more than anything else, particularly wanting it more than you want to worship and serve the Lord. If you want worldly security more than you want to serve the Lord, if you want worldly security more than you want the name of God to be glorified, if you want worldly security more than you want to see people come to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, then it's become an idol, that is, it has become a life-dominating sin and must be repented of. And the Lord has a way of rooting these idols out. It's exactly what he's doing with the nation of Judah. He's rooting out the idols.

Now what's going to happen is he's bringing these terrible circumstances to bear so that they will come to terms with their wicked hearts but what's going to happen is not all of them are going to return, in fact, a remnant is going to return to the Lord, a smaller number, the majority are going to turn away from God in bitterness and rage and anger. But the message of the Lord is, listen, and this is so obvious when we really think about it in terms of eternity, when you put our circumstances in the light of eternity, what is the value of a temporary peace and prosperity? What is the eternal value of a comfortable life in the span of eternity? As Jesus says, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his soul?" And God is kind enough, God is so merciful, God is wise enough to know that there is an allure to the things of this world that pulls at the heart of every even genuine believer and we must learn to hate the love of the world so that we can love the kingdom of God, and he uses circumstances, he uses suffering to expose this craving and to call us to crucify it through union with Christ.

So the essence of the disease is a craving for worldly security. It is a disease that is deadly. If you want this more than you want anything else, you do not know Christ. If you're unwilling to turn from the love of worldly security, if you love the world that much, then the Scripture says we don't love Christ. 1 John 2:15 says, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world, for if any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." So we cannot love the world and it is good of God, it is so good of God to help wean us off of the love of the world because the world is alluring and you see, in one sense, because we were created originally for a perfect world, man was created to live in a world where everything worked, where everything was right, where everything was just, where everything was holy, and so there's a sense in which it's good and right to want justice and it's good and right to want well-being, and it's good and right to want comfort, but the issue is if we want that thing in this life only, then we are evidencing that

we don't belong to the Lord because we can't have those things in this world because sin has not only wrecked the world, it's wrecked us. We cannot have those things in this world.

The essence of the disease is a craving for worldly security. The evidence, the second subpoint, this is the second subpoint. The disease, first of all, the essence, the craving for worldly security. The evidence or symptoms is a dead orthodoxy, a dead orthodoxy that really describes the spiritual state of the nation of Judah. Dead orthodoxy. We saw a little bit of this in chapter 7, verse 2, when we saw the terror that shook the people. These are the people of God. These are the people who belong to the Lord. Why are they shaking, their hearts so overcome that they're shaking like trees of the forest in the wind? Because their faith is not being shown to be real. It's a dead faith. It's not a living faith. It doesn't mean we can't be afraid but if we are consumed with fear, overcome with fear, unable to find hope in the Lord, then we need to examine our hearts to see if we have truly placed our faith in Christ. The Lord does use circumstances like this to shake us so that what we will see that we have in our hearts is something that is unshakable, a faith and a hope that cannot be shaken. So there's no power in essentially this assessment, and it doesn't mean that all of the people of Judah are like this because Isaiah and a number, there are a number of faithful in Judah that are not like this, but the overwhelming majority of people are shaking in terror.

Now turn with me to chapter 1 because this helps set the context to understand what's going on in Isaiah's ministry in Isaiah's day. I mentioned a dead orthodoxy. There's no power in their faith, no spiritual life in their faith, but they have a form of faith. They are, in fact, very religious people and we could say their religion is orthodox, especially as you compare it to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Now look at this, chapter 1, Isaiah 1:10-15. He's speaking to the nation of Judah. He's speaking to the southern kingdom and he says,

10 Hear the word of the LORD, You rulers of Sodom; Give ear to the instruction of our God, You people of Gomorrah.

Now the Lord just lays it right on the table, doesn't he, right there? "Listen, I'm talking to My people and I'm talking to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah." Sodom and Gomorrah have been gone for centuries, for over a thousand years at this point since the days of Abraham. But he's saying, "No, you are living like Sodom and Gomorrah." Look what he says in verse 11,

11 "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle; And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. 12 When you come to appear before Me, Who requires of you this trampling of My courts? 13 Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies-- I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. 14 I hate your new moon festivals and

your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood."

Now the first thing that jumps out as you read this is that they are very religious people. He says multiplied sacrifices. He specifically speaks of burnt offerings, of the fat of cattle, bulls, lambs, goats. They're offering all the sacrifices they're supposed to offer. And he talks about the trampling of his courts. They're not only offering all the sacrifices they're supposed to offer, they're offering the sacrifices they're supposed to offer where they're supposed to offer them, the temple, the one place that you're supposed to at that point in time and history, God in his progressive revelation of how we are to come to know him, at this point in time is he's teaching us through the history of Israel, he's teaching them there's one place where God meets man and that is the temple that God designates, the place God designates, the temple in Jerusalem. That's where you bring your sacrifices. That's where you pray. The nation of Judah, they were correct and obedient to those commands in outward form. They were doing what they were supposed to do, where they were supposed to do it, not only what they were supposed to do, where they were supposed to do it, also when they were supposed to do it. He mentions the new moons and sabbaths in verse 14. There was a new moon festival that God had prescribed, you can find these things in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, that all of these things were prescribed, certain kinds of offerings, five different kinds of offerings in the first chapters of Leviticus, festivals of worship throughout the seasons of the year, appointed feasts, new moon festivals. Every time a new moon came, a certain kind of offering and worship was called for and God is saying that the people in Isaiah's day were faithful in one sense to do what they were supposed to do, when they were supposed to do it, and where they were supposed to do it. The nation of Israel was doing none of this, the northern kingdom. They were worshiping God in false ways, in false times, in false places. And so the nation of Judah took comfort in their orthodoxy, "We are doing what God's word calls us to do. We're doing what God's word calls us to do, when we're supposed to do it, where we're supposed to do it."

So these words were astonishing to them. They were religious people and God is calling them on the carpet and saying, "Listen, you who think you're religious, you are really no better than Sodom or Gomorrah, and in reality your sacrifices are offensive to Me." How can that be? Because their hearts were not in them. They were worshiping God in outward form and external ways. As Isaiah says later and Jesus quotes in his own ministry, "These people worship Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me." And God looks on the heart.

And so there is this dead orthodoxy. They're very religious yet also very worldly. He says, "Your hands are covered with blood." He goes on to explain in verses 16 and following, particularly look down to verse 21,

21 How the faithful city has become a harlot, She who was full of justice!
Righteousness once lodged in her, But now murderers.

The faithful city has become a harlot. There's sexual promiscuity. There is murder in the sense of I think here he's talking about the murder of the heart. It's filled with people who call other people fools. It's filled with people who hate others in their hearts. And so if you're hating people in your heart, if your life is filled with impurity, he goes on to talk about if you love money, verse 23,

23 Your rulers are rebels And companions of thieves; Everyone loves a bribe And chases after rewards. They do not defend the orphan, Nor does the widow's plea come before them.

He's talking among the people of God, and so this isn't about for us, this isn't about America or any other particular nation. This is about the people of God. We are to hold this plumb line up against the church and our lives. Are we murderers? Are we harlots? Are we lovers of money? Even though we may have the outward form of orthodoxy, what is the true status of our heart? And the good thing is the Lord brings along circumstances to show us and the circumstances of suffering that have come to the nation of Judah are like a CT scan that shows what's underneath the surface, that shows the malignancy that's underneath the surface invisible to the eye. But how grateful we are for those things because then there's treatment.

For us in Reformed circles, we need to be especially mindful of this because we can sometimes take great pride in our orthodoxy, that we believe the right things about God's word, that we have a sound doctrine of the Trinity, that we understand the importance of understanding the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. We can take comfort in our doctrinal correctness but the question is what's the condition of our heart? And he goes on to show that the condition of the heart is shown in fruit, the fruit of not being overwhelmed by fear "for God has not given us a spirit of fear but a spirit of power and of love and of discipline, a sound mind," 2 Timothy 1. So that's the fruit of the Spirit. When we have the Spirit, we have the ability to overcome fear. We still tend to be afraid and like Paul is encouraging Timothy there, "Don't be afraid. Don't be ashamed. Don't turn back. Remember you've been given a spirit of power and of love and of discipline. So cling to God and who He is." So the Lord brings the circumstance to bring out the fruit, and as we see the ungodly fruit come out, the answer is turn from that, recognize the disease, hate it.

So that's the disease, the craving for worldly security that evidences itself in dead orthodoxy. The treatment, number 2, the treatment. In a word, the treatment is suffering. The treatment for a craving for worldly security and dead orthodoxy is suffering. That is how God treats his people. It's like chemotherapy in real life. It's like bringing to bear the power of something that brings great pain but through it saves the life, and we see this in chapter 7. Let's look again at chapter 7. We just saw in verses 1 and 2 the disease, the craving for worldly security. He's going to tell them what he's going to do in the rest of chapter 7. Let's just walk through this together. After we're told that their hearts are shaking like trees of the forest shake with the wind, verse 3 of Isaiah 7,

3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field, 4 and say to him [that is, say to Ahaz], 'Take care and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted because of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands,

He says, "Don't be afraid of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands." God's basically correctly assessing, "This is what these two guys you're afraid of, Rezin and Pekah, the king of Israel, Rezin, the king of the Arameans, they're just little smoldering, washed up torches, good for nothing."

5 'Because Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you, saying, 6 Let us go up against Judah and terrorize it, and make for ourselves a breach in its walls and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,"

This is the full conspiracy that they're working out. Verse 7,

7 thus says the Lord GOD: "It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass.

The Lord gives a promise to this ungodly king, "This is not going to stand." They wanted to come in and replace the Davidic king with a puppet king and God says, "No, I'm not going to allow that. The line of David is secure. I will not let that happen. Even though you deserve far worse than that, I won't let it happen."

He says in verse 8,

8 "For the head of Aram is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin (now within another 65 years Ephraim will be shattered, so that it is no longer a people), 9 and the head of Ephraim is Samaria and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you will not believe, you surely shall not last."

Here's a gracious word of God to Ahaz, "You need to believe. You need to trust and if you don't, you won't last." That's a message to all of us. The answer is when we are afflicted, believe, trust. If you will not believe, you will not last. If you will believe, clearly faithful is the one you place your faith in.

Verse 10,

10 Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 11 "Ask a sign for yourself [this is Isaiah speaking for the Lord, says to Ahaz] Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

This is amazing. He's saying, "Listen, I know you're struggling with unbelief, ask for a sign." This is a place where God is saying ask for a sign. Jesus tells the people it's wicked to want to ask for a sign but here he knows the weakness of his faith, Ahaz doesn't have any faith at all, ask for a sign. Then Ahaz does something characteristically evil, he basically disobeys the Lord.

12 ... "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!"

He brings up, quotes a verse when God has given him a direct word. Then Isaiah said,

13 Then he said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? [Then he gives the sign] 14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. 15 He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. 16 "For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.

Isaiah is going to have a son and then this is also a prophecy of another son that will come, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a double fulfillment. He's saying, "Listen, there's going to be a son born to a young maiden and this son before he's old enough to know, to choose evil or to do good, before he's even that far along, the two kings you're worried about are going to be destroyed."

Verse 17, but

17 "The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah,

Even though the ones you're afraid of are not going to be the ones that are going to do something to do. God's going to bring something really profoundly terrible upon you that is greater than anything that's happened since the kingdom separated between northern and southern kingdom. Then he interestingly the phrase at the end of that,

the king of Assyria.

Then he stops there. What God's going to bring on you is the king of Assyria.

We see this worked out a little more in chapter 8, verses 6 to 8. Remember we read earlier verse 6, "Inasmuch as these people," this is chapter 8,

6 "Inasmuch as these people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah And rejoice in Rezin and the son of Remaliah; 7 Now therefore,

behold, the Lord is about to bring on them the strong and abundant waters of the Euphrates,

He uses the metaphor of a flood, that he's going to bring upon them the abundant, they wouldn't drink of the waters of Shiloah, they wouldn't drink of the waters of God so therefore God is going to bring on them the floodwaters of the Euphrates. The Euphrates is the river that is a part of the kingdom of Assyria. Assyria located in Mesopotamia, the Tigris and the Euphrates both rivers running through it, Euphrates closest to Israel. The waters of the Euphrates are going to flood into Judah, verse 7,

Even the king of Assyria and all his glory; And it will rise up over all its channels and go over all its banks. 8 Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through, It will reach even to the neck; And the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

"God's judgment, God with us. God is coming in judgment and what's going to happen is you're going to experience, you who wanted to reach out to Assyria for relief to get a drink of water, you're going to have so much water it's going to fill all the way up until you're up and you're standing on your tiptoes with your neck above the water trying to stay alive. That's what's going to happen to you, Ahaz. God is going to do that." And the people of God are all going to be caught up in it. The faithful, Isaiah is going to have to live through this and all of the kingdom of Judah, those whose hearts are not trusting in the Lord are going to live through this.

This is the way God treats, this is the way God treats the disease of loving the world. You love the world, you trust in the things of the world, he lets the world come in with such ferocity that we find ourselves being overwhelmed by the world. We wanted worldly security, we wanted to look to worldly things, he says, "Have all that you want," and he brings it all the way up to here. This is what he did with his people. This is what he's done throughout history with his people. This is what he may be doing in our day.

Turn with me in the New Testament to just show this pattern of how the treatment for the disease of worldliness and loving the world and craving worldly security is suffering. Turn with me to 1 Peter 4:12-17. 1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." Don't be surprised at the fiery, it's not just an ordeal, it's a fiery ordeal. Fire is something I don't want to have to experience. I mean, being burned is not pleasant, is it? It's a fiery ordeal. He says, "Don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes upon you as though some strange thing was happening to you. This is not a strange thing. This is perfectly normal," he says.

Look what he goes on to say, "but to the degree," verse 13, "that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is

not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God." Peter is writing to believers in the first century in Asia and Cappadocia and Bithynia, people who believed in the Lord Jesus, and he's saying, "Listen, suffering is coming. Suffering is normal. When it happens, don't think something strange or weird is happening." This is normal. This is God's normal pattern.

And this is true, I mean, we all know from experience if you've walked with the Lord long, you know that God has used suffering in your life to remind you of what really matters. It can be relational strife. It can be physical suffering. It can be job loss. It can be financial pressure. It can be all kinds of things but the Lord uses it to great benefit. And political and social upheaval and political turmoil are normal things that God has used throughout history as well. In fact, it's good to remember that it's really America for the last couple hundred years and our religious freedom and the ability to worship unhindered and unbothered by the government is actually an aberration, it's a unique thing in world history. It's actually much more normal to be persecuted when you want to worship Jesus Christ.

So we don't pray for persecution, we don't want persecution, we're not supposed to want that but when it comes, when God brings it, we're not to be surprised as though some strange, weird thing were happening and we're to realize that God uses this to great effect. So get on God's agenda. This is what the people of Isaiah's day needed to do, they needed to get on God's agenda. God is bringing in the Assyrians to wean us off of this worldly desire for trusting in earthly security. That's his treatment. In fact, you see this, turn back over a page back over probably in your Bible, one page back to chapter 1, verse 6, when he says this salvation you've received, verse 6, "In this you greatly rejoice," 1 Peter 1:6, in this your salvation, "you greatly rejoice even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." The idea is you rejoice in your future salvation but in the meantime you're tested by trials and these have come to purify your faith in the same way gold is purified over the refiner's fire. You can only purify gold by heating it up, so if you want pure gold, you must bring the fire to it.

You see this also if you turn back a couple of pages toward the front of your Bible, the next book previous to 1 Peter is James, James 1:2. Chapter 1, verse 2, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." Now why would you consider it all joy when you encounter various trials? James gives the answer. Why? Why do you count it joy? "Knowing," verse 3, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Trials, various trials, various times of testing produce from your faith endurance and endurance produces proven character and it produces a sense in which our faith becomes more well-rounded and we have everything we need.

What's amazing about this, Hebrews 5, I'll just mention this, verses 7 to 10. Verse 8, one of the most amazing verses in Scripture, Jesus learned obedience through the things he

suffered. Just meditate on that this week. He was perfect. He never sinned and yet he learned obedience through the things he suffered. That is, his character was forged more and more into a perfect righteousness. It wasn't that anything needed to be weeded out, it wasn't anything that needed to be purified, it was that every opportunity gave him more opportunity to produce a perfect record of righteousness. But he had to suffer for that to happen. If Jesus had to suffer, if he had to suffer so that he could produce a perfect record of righteousness, how can we not need to suffer?

So this is the way of God, the treatment is suffering. Now that's the second point. The disease, the craving for worldly security, the treatment is suffering and affliction. Thirdly, the cure. Back to Isaiah 8. There are four points, four subpoints under the cure that flow out of this leading right into chapter 9. We're going to start in chapter 8, verse 11, and here's the first subpoint. The cure, what is the cure for this disease, a craving for worldly security? The first cure is the command "fear God," especially four imperatives, four commands. First is "fear God, not anything else." Verse 11 of Isaiah 8,

11 For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me
not to walk in the way of this people,

He said God spoke to him with power and said, "Isaiah, do not walk in the way of this people."

12 "You are not to say, 'It is a conspiracy!' In regard to all that this people
call a conspiracy, And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of
it. 13 It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He
shall be your fear, And He shall be your dread. 14 Then He shall become a
sanctuary;

He says, "You're not to walk in the way they walk. They fear the things of this world." And when he says it's not a conspiracy, interesting word, it means a binding together, an alliance with treasonous intent. Now I think this is talking about the fact that the people were probably saying about the issue of what King Ahaz was doing, it's treasonous what he's doing trying to make a deal with the Assyrians. His evil is so great. Don't be so preoccupied with the evil of others, he's saying. He's not saying it's not evil, he's not saying it's not wrong. He's not saying it's not a conspiracy. He's not saying that. This world is full of conspiracies. Satan is the ruler of this realm. He is a liar and a deceiver and he's always conspiring against God and the people of God but he's saying to us we're not to be preoccupied with the working of evil.

Now there's places where we have to deal with it, we have to address it, I'm not saying that. It's basically it's calling us to an indignation that is proportionate. Now listen to me carefully: it doesn't mean that you can't be indignant about the evil and the conspiracies or whatever in the world. You can be indignant, the problem is our indignation is out of proportion. We are so indignant about what's happening in the world because we are in these ways loving the world too much. If we see, if we love the kingdom of God as we ought and we love the name of God as we ought, then the conspiracies of this world,

though they're worthy of a measure of indignation, are small in comparison to the indignation that we should have at our own sinfulness. That's where the indignation belongs. It belongs in here, in the church. That's where you and I need to be indignant. We need to help each other to say, "Look, the most evil thing is that I love the world so much that I'm consumed with thoughts about what's going on all the time." It doesn't mean there's not a place in your life for that, it means that it's not consuming you and that you can turn from those things that we can't control. They had no control over this conspiracy. You turn from those things that you can't control to what you can control and that is your fear. You can turn from fearing the evil in this world and you can stop fearing that and start fearing God.

That's what he's saying here. You're not to be in fear or in dread, so when you feel fear and dread growing, it's time to stop thinking about those things and start thinking about the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory. "Holy, holy, holy is He." It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy, how that resonates with Isaiah 6. The Lord of hosts, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of the heavenly armies. All that the world is doing is a drop in the bucket. It's nothing. It's of yesterday. It's a vapor that passes away. God is on the throne and so the question is what is he doing in all of this? It doesn't mean we still don't have responsibilities, supposed to do things, we're supposed to take action, we're supposed to be obedient. Yes, we need to even think about what good citizenship is, but it needs to be proportionate. Our main burden must be, "Lord, I want Your kingship in my life. I want to live as a faithful follower of Jesus through the path that You have laid out before me. I want to prize Your kingdom above everything else."

So fear God. That's the first part of the cure. So 3A, fear God, the cure. Fear God. B. Second subpoint: cling to his word. Verses 16 to 18,

16 Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples.

He says, "Bind up the testimony." He's talking about the word of God. "Seal up the law among my disciples." What you must hold onto is the word of God. Verse 17, "when you bind up the testimony, you seal the law," and this is Isaiah talking,

17 And I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him.

"Even though I know God is hiding His face from His people right now, I'm going to cling to His word and keep trusting in Him. I know that He's at work bringing affliction but I'm going to keep trusting Him because this is what He wants from me." This is where though Job didn't mean it like he said it, he still uttered something beautiful, when you look at it in context, he wasn't quite, his words were better than his heart but his words are good, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Though the Lord is bringing affliction, I will trust Him. I will hold onto His word which is what strengthens my heart. Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. I will let the word abide in my heart so that my faith will grow and my trust will grow in Him." Cling to his word.

Look at verse 20.

20 To the law and to the testimony!

Now it's interesting, you look at verse 19, I said there's a separation happening. Many of those in the nation of Judah are going to turn away from the Lord. They're going to stumble as he talks about in a few verses back in verse 14b and verse 15. This time of testing will cause stumbling for them. Verse 19, they're going to say,

19 ... "Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,"
should not a people consult their God?

The people of Judah, the people of, the religious people are going to be talking about looking to other means of revelation, find other sources of hope and encouragement. They're going to go out looking to mediums and spiritists, people who talk to the dead. This is unthinkable that this would be happening in Judah. This is why God called them Sodom and Gomorrah. He said, "I know what's in your heart and when you're pushed, you will become just like the ungodly wicked people around you." But the faithful, to those of us who belong to Christ, we must not listen to those people who are saying go anywhere else. The one place we must hold onto, the one thing we must go to and hold onto is the word of God.

After he says that, the spiritists and the mediums, then he says,

Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? [No] 20 To the law
and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is
because they have no dawn [they have no light in them].

So our message is to the word of God. Let every man be a liar and God be true. All lies around us, it doesn't matter, we have the word of God. And this leads then now into the separation is happening because of suffering. You see, they're suffering and so they then, verse 21, "They will pass through the land," this is the ungodly now,

21 They will pass through the land hard-pressed and famished, and it will
turn out that when they are hungry, they will be enraged and curse their
king and their God as they face upward.

The ungodly formerly religious people will become enraged and hate God in their suffering. You see the suffering in this present world separates the wheat from the chaff. And so it's so urgent for us to cling to what God is telling us to cling to, to fear him, to cling to his word.

22 Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the
gloom of anguish; and they will be driven away into darkness.

That's the context for these wonderful verses that we always read, Isaiah 9:1-7,

1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

Those verses are quoted in Matthew's gospel when Jesus begins his preaching ministry, when he goes to Capernaum. "This was to fulfill what was written by Isaiah the prophet. There will be no more darkness. The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light." The land of Naphtali and the land of Zebulun are in the region of Galilee on the border of the sea of Galilee, and Jesus would come to that place. It's interesting to think about this, Zebulun and Naphtali were the first places conquered by the Assyrians. They were the first places that experienced that floodwaters of the Euphrates pouring over them, demolishing them. God is going to even in that place, he's going to shine his light. You see, this is the message that no matter what happens you turn to God, you hope in God because he, though he afflicts you, he will heal you if you turn to him. He's a God who is infinite in lovingkindness and compassion.

So essentially verses 1 to 7 of chapter 9 are the third imperative. Fear God. The cure: fear God, cling to his word, thirdly, submit to his King. That's the message here in these verses. Submit to his King because it's all about the child who is to be born. He's going to take darkness to light. He is the light. He is the light who has come into the world. He's going to take gloom and make it gladness. Look at the emphasis of gladness in verse 3,

3 ... You shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence
As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the
spoil.

What he's saying is when you submit to his King, you will have gladness in the midst of gloom. You will have an unshakable joy in the midst of times of suffering. Christ will give that to you and not only that, you will have freedom instead of distress. You'll go from anguish, the word "anguish" repeated in 8:22 and 9:1 pictures being pressed in and held down and bound up, and now what happens in verses 4 and 5, the yoke is broken, the staff is broken, the rod of the oppressor is broken by the Messiah. So freedom comes. Light, gladness and freedom are found in the birth of this child.

You submit to his King, God's King, the Messiah to come, the child to be born to us, the son to be given to us, the government will rest on his shoulders. You submit to his government. You say, "Lord Jesus, reign over me." That's salvation. Repent and believe the gospel, believe that he died for you, that he did everything necessary to pay for your sins, that he bore in his body the wrath of God against your sins and he paid the full measure of that wrath as he hung on Calvary, suffering indescribable physical agony, suffering beyond that, unimaginable spiritual agony as he experiences separation from the Father, the Father somehow turning his face away from the Son so that the Son hanging there as the bearer of sin becoming sin for us, 2 Corinthians 5:21, becoming sin for us.

The sky becomes dark at 12 noon because God is light and in him is no darkness at all and Jesus hangs there, in a sense, separated from the favor of his Father for the first time in all eternity. That's why he did not want to go to the cross and there he pays the full measure of wrath. What is the full measure of wrath? What do you deserve and I deserve because of our sins? To be separated from God forever. Jesus experienced separation from God. He experienced hell on the cross. And when he said, "It is finished," he meant it is finished, it is completed, it is paid in full, and if you believe in him and you trust in him and you rest in him and you submit to him, to his government, you will have his joy, you will have his light, you will have his blessing.

And the fourth subpoint: rest in his glory. Rest in his glory. Submit to his King, rest and you could say rest in his glorious person and work in these four wonderful terms, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. You submit to the King Jesus as your King and you rest in his work, you rest in who he is and what he's done. He's the Wonderful Counselor. He's the one who knows how to counsel you. So you don't know what to do, you don't know how to do, you don't know where to go, what to do, what to think. He's the Wonderful Counselor, you go to Jesus and his counsel isn't just accurate, it's wonderful. It's supernatural. It's marvelous, that's what this idea means. It's so incredible that it's mind-blowingly wonderful. It's exactly what I need. Jesus, he's my counselor. This is really picturing union with Christ, to submit to the King, to be united to him so that he's where I go when I don't know what to think or what to do. I go to Jesus. Now we help each other find Jesus. We're supposed to help each other and we counsel one another. Yes, we do but in reality all of our counsel should be leading us to, leading our brother or sister to the Wonderful Counselor. It's Christ that we need.

So he's the Wonderful Counselor. He's the Mighty God. Look at his person and his ability, how able he is to do everything that we need. We're afraid, we look at the world around us and we're afraid in it. We have the Mighty God living in us. He is God himself. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He spoke the world into being. John 1:1-3. Through him all things were created that have been created. Apart from him nothing has been created that has been created.

He's the Mighty God. He's the Everlasting Father. Look at his character. Look at his kindness. He's one with the Father. Look at his compassion. We go to a Christ who is not only able but who is concerned and who cares for us. My favorite verse is in Psalm 103, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on us. He is mindful of our frame. He remembers that we are dust." He knows that you're dust. He knows that I'm dust and that's what Jesus is like. Jesus is just like the Father. "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

He's the Everlasting Father and then he's the Prince of Peace. He is the one who brings peace. He's the one who brings shalom. He's the one who brings inner sense of absolute, complete and total well-being in the midst of external turmoil. He speaks peace to the storm on the sea of Galilee and remember the waters became calm. He can speak peace in our hearts and give us that kind. He is the Prince of Peace.

So when you have Jesus, you have everything that you need and the Lord uses our circumstances to remind us that Jesus is all that we need. And you know, you don't really know that he's all that you need until you need him more than you can imagine. The more that you need him and then you rest in him, the more that you see he was all that I needed all along, and then your heart rejoices. "God, thank You for making me suffer because now I've come to know more of Christ." This is what Paul was talking about when he said, when he had the thorn in the flesh and he kept pleading with the Lord to take it away and Jesus said, "I'm not going to take it away." He prayed three times. It wasn't that he didn't have enough faith. No, that's nonsense. God had a purpose in the thorn in the flesh and it was to make him know the glory of weakness. Paul said Jesus came to him and said, "My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness." And Paul said, "Therefore I will glory in my weakness for when I am weak then I am strong." When God calls us to suffer, he calls us to know our weakness so that we can find the sufficiency of Christ and we can know the joy of when we're weak, then we're strong. None of us is able to endure suffering, none of us has the ability to stand up for Christ in difficulty against persecution, none of us is able but Jesus is and his Spirit is within everyone who has repented and placed their faith in Christ and he will never leave you. No, never, and that's enough.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your glorious message of hope and joy in the person and work of Jesus. Lord, be glorified in Your people. Help us to be faithful. Lord, we know that we don't know what tomorrow holds but we know that You know because You hold tomorrow in Your hand. Help us to cling to Christ and to be made more and more like Him and to be filled with more and more joy and more and more faith and more and more hope so that the world can see the difference that Jesus makes. We pray in His name. Amen.