

# Advent 2017:

## Unwrapping The Gift Of Christmas

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.  
(Isaiah 9:2 ESV)*

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.  
(Micah 5:2 ESV)*

*And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold,  
I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.  
(Luke 2:10 ESV)*

*“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”  
(Luke 2:14 ESV)*

### **Hope: For To Us A Child Is Born**

**December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017**

**Isaiah 9:1-7**

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#### **Introduction:**

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Isaiah 9:1-7; that’s on page 573 in your pew Bibles. I mentioned last week that we are going to do a traditional Advent this year in anticipation of Christmas. We don’t do that every year, but I thought that it would be good to do it this year. The word “Advent” just means “coming” and traditionally we have used the Advent season to help people understand the significance of the coming of Christ. The four most significant historical events in terms of our salvation would be the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ – and it is appropriate that we slow down when it comes time to remember and to celebrate those events. And so we will. Traditionally the church has often set aside four Sundays before Christmas Sunday for Advent – Christmas Sunday is always the Sunday following December 25<sup>th</sup> – and they have used those four Sundays to work through a series of anticipatory themes. Hope, love, joy and peace and this year we are going to

be guided by that which means that this morning we are going to be talking about hope. We are going to be talking about the fact that Christmas changes everything. It represents the great intervention in the history of human kind. This is a story about TURN AROUND and RESCUE and REDEMPTION. It is a story about HOPE told first to people who were in deep and dark despair.

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1.

1 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

3 You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

4 For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:1–7 ESV)

The prophetic scope of Isaiah is unparalleled in the Old Testament. Isaiah saw the coming collapse of the northern Kingdom and their defeat and deportation to Assyria. He saw beyond that to the apostasy and demise of Judah. He saw the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian Exile and he saw the return under Cyrus during the time of the Persians. He saw the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the worship. But he also understood that as glorious as the return from exile would be – it would not be the last work of redemption that God would have to undertake for his people. They would come back from the exile but they would not come back SAVED. In fact, Isaiah saw that they would bring the darkness with them. But thanks be to God, Isaiah saw even further than that. Thanks be to God Isaiah saw Jesus. He saw Christmas. He saw an intervention that would change the world. And he announced that intervention to the people living in darkness.

Look at the opening verse he mentions Zebulun and Naphtali and Galilee of the Gentiles – these are the first people that Isaiah says will go into exile and darkness. This is Northern Israel – these are the people who will suffer the most and suffer it first. But to them he gives a word of hope. In

verse 2 he says:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. (v. 2. ESV)

This message of hope is for people who have experienced the WORST that this world has to offer. This message of hope is a COMPLETE turn around. It is a DRAMATIC RESCUE and a TOTAL RESTORATION.

Isaiah is talking about Christmas and he is convinced that it is a really, really big deal. And he tells us why. There are three “because” statements in this passage. You can see them for yourself. Each one begins with the Hebrew word “kee” which indicates causal or logical relationship, meaning that answers the questions about why. It will be translated in your Bible as “because” or “for”. Each of these little sentences tells us why Christmas is a really big deal.

### **Why Is Christmas Such A Big Deal?**

The first one says that Christmas is a big deal:

#### **1. Because the Lord has acted once again in power to save and deliver his people**

You see that one in verse 4:

**For** the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. (Isaiah 9:4 ESV)

As on the day of Midian – what does that mean? That is a reference to the time of Gideon – do you remember him? God called on Gideon to rise up and deliver his people from the Midianites who were oppressing them and Gideon said:

“Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.” (Judges 6:15 ESV)

How can I do this? I am not rich, I’m not a great warrior, I don’t have any soldiers under my command – how can I save the people of Israel? And God said:

“But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.” (Judges 6:16 ESV)

God chose Gideon because God wanted everyone to understand that salvation is not through armies – salvation is not through swords ultimately – salvation BELONGS TO THE LORD.

Now the prophet Isaiah says that God is going to deliver us LIKE THAT AGAIN – AS IN the days of the Midianites. Once again, God is going to work a salvation that has nothing to do with armies or swords. Once again, God is going to use someone humble and seemingly insignificant to accomplish his purposes of salvation.

You see, in the Old Testament, the people of God never really understood what the real problem was. They thought the problem was that they lived in a bad neighbourhood. They had Midianites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians and Romans – it was a bad neighbourhood and so they assumed that they needed a body guard. They needed a guy who would beat up the neighbours so they could live in peace. That’s the salvation they thought they needed and that’s why they didn’t understand Jesus. Do you remember in John 6 when the people finally figure out that Jesus is the Messiah? He’s the one sent by God to work salvation. So what do they do? They try and force him to become a king according to their own expectations – and Jesus runs away. John says:

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:15 ESV)

That isn’t what I’ve come to do! I haven’t come to beat up the neighbours! They aren’t the problem – you are. You see that is what God’s people had never understood. The real problem wasn’t OUT THERE – the real problem was in here.

This is one of the fundamental differences between the Christian world view and the secular world view. The secular world view thinks that all of the problems and all of the solutions are “out there”. So if your child is acting out then you need education or you need medication – you need things out there to come in here. The Bible says the opposite. The Bible says:

Foolishness *is* bound in the heart of a child (Proverbs 22:15 KJV)

The problem is INSIDE and it comes OUT and ruins the environment. That's what the Bible says – for children and for adults.

The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45 ESV)

The Bible says, everything starts in here and comes out. Problems start in here and leak out. The environment doesn't ruin us – we ruin it. Part of what it means to convert to the Christian worldview is understanding that. Problems and solutions start here.

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV)

The NIV translates that:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. (Jeremiah 17:9 NIV11-GK)

So that's the problem! The human heart is broken and beyond cure! It will take a miracle to fix what cannot be fixed – it will take an act of GRACE and a Divine Intervention and that is exactly what the prophets began to see in the redemptive purpose of God. Ezekiel said in his climactic prophecy heard God say:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26 ESV)

That is the salvation that we need and that is what the prophet promises in Isaiah 9:4. He promises a salvation that has nothing to do with armies and nothing to do with swords. He promises a salvation that isn't about beating up the neighbours. A salvation that isn't about killing anybody. It's about 1 person dying on behalf of the world. He will go on to talk a great deal about that. He says in chapter 53:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Sounds like Gideon again in the days of the Midianites.

4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3–5 ESV)

The heart is deceitful above all things and BEYOND CURE – and yet, because of the intervention of God, by his wounds we are healed. That is how we get a new heart and a new spirit – this is how God’s people are finally and gloriously saved. By an unlikely and seemingly insignificant person, bearing our sins in his body on the cross. That is how God will act to save and deliver his people – as on the day of Midian.

Thanks be to God!

Secondly, the prophet says that Christmas is a really big deal:

## **2. Because our enemy has been defeated, disarmed and despoiled**

Look at verse 5:

**For** every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:5 ESV)

So Isaiah says that our enemy will be utterly defeated and in fact God’s people will pick up all their discarded armaments and use them as fuel for the fire. Now, of course the issue again is to correctly identify the enemy. Who is the enemy that will be defeated, disarmed and despoiled? Well we’ve already talked about how our real enemy isn’t the neighbours – the real enemy is inside. So who are we talking about here? Well the New Testament helps us with this question. Jesus says:

if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. (Matthew 12:28–29 ESV)

So Jesus says that he has come to defeat and despoil the enemy. He has come to bind Satan and to set free all of his captives. He tells the disciples that the preaching of the Gospel throws down the power of our enemy. He said that in Luke 10. The disciples return from a fabulously successful preaching tour and Jesus says:

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” (Luke 10:18 ESV)

Every time you preached the Gospel it was like a BODY BLOW was being delivered to our ancient foe. You scored a knockout and Satan fell down cold!

The Apostle Paul said that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the preaching of that Gospel to the nations – effectively robbed the devil of all his power.

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Colossians 2:15 ESV)

So, who is the enemy that is defeated, disarmed and despoiled? It is the devil. That is why the Bible says:

we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12 ESV)

Our battle is against the devil – and because of Jesus he is a defeated, disarmed and despoiled foe. But still dangerous.

Now you say, hold on a second. A minute ago you said that the real enemy was US – the real enemy was INSIDE – but now you are saying that it is the devil – which is it? And the answer is both. James, the brother of Jesus said:

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:14–15 ESV)

You see the devil is an agitator and an accuser – that is all. He stirs up what is already there in your broken heart. He whispers to your lusts and fans them into flame. He suggests and he flatters and he asks devastating questions like:

Did God actually say ... (Genesis 3:1 ESV)

He strokes our ego and he feeds our rebellion and he lures us onto the power of the law. That is the sword in the devil's hand – that is why he is called “the accuser of the brethren”. That's what the word “Satan” means. In Hebrew it is *ha-shatan* which means “the accuser”. The only way he can kill human beings is by luring them onto the power of the law. That's why the Apostle Paul sings that little song in 1 Corinthians 15:

55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. (1 Corinthians 15:55–56 ESV)

What Paul is saying there is that once you become a Christian the devil has no power over you. The Gospel of Jesus Christ – his birth, life, death and resurrection knocks the sword out of the devil’s hand.

Think of it like this. The law is like an electric fence. It marks off the way of life from the way of death. God electrified it to protect us from everything outside. The law is good but it is powerful. And the devil uses the power of the law to kill wicked and rebellious people. He sees the lean in their own heart. He sees the hatred for authority. He sees the dissatisfaction and ingratitude and he lures them slowly but surely towards the power and lethality of the fence. And then when they are close – very close – he shoves them hard against that fence and kills them. He goes to God and he says:

“Have you seen what this child of Adam has done? Does not your word say that the one who does this must die?”

That is the sword in the devil’s hand.

That is the sum of his power over human beings. He can whisper. He can lie. And he can lure.

But now, because of Christ, the electric current of the fence has been turned off. Jesus cast himself upon the fence and absorbed all of its punitive power. He paid the penalty for our trespasses. The fence is still there – but it is no longer lethal. If you are in Christ, the power is off. The fence is still a helpful guide but it is no longer a weapon in the hands of our Adversary.

Our enemy is a defeated foe. He has been disarmed and he is being despoiled by the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – thanks be to God!

Thirdly, the prophet says that Christmas is a really big deal:



### **3. Because the child has been born who will lead and change the world**

That's my favourite "for" in this passage by a long shot. Look at verse 6:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6-7 ESV)

I love what J. Alec Motyer says about this passage. He says:

"Did you notice, as you read, the three 'because' verses (vv.4-6) – a rising tide of explanation?"<sup>1</sup>

I like that phrase: "a rising tide". The first two were really leading us towards the big one.

Christmas is a really big deal at the end of the day because JESUS IS A REALLY BIG DEAL.

Jesus is the One who will lead and change the world.

FOR unto us a child is born, to us a son is given. And the government – the RULE OF THIS WORLD – shall be upon his shoulder. This is why we pray – thy kingdom come. This is why we pray – thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven – because that is the ultimate hope of this world. This world will not be saved by education, science or human government. That isn't to say that those things are unimportant. Those are good things – but not god things. And those things will always fall short and they will always disappoint because they are ultimately human things and that means that they flow out of the human heart. They are tainted by human lust, greed, ambition and self deception. So they can help but they cannot save – those things too need to be saved. Those things too ultimately need to be brought under the saving and transforming Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the only one who saves. Salvation belongs to the Lord! And Jesus is the Lord. Isaiah tells us all about him. He is:

#### **i. Wonderful Counsellor**

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<sup>1</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah By The Day*, (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2011), 58.

The best translation of the Hebrew here is actually “a wonder of a counsellor”. He is a miraculous and marvellous leader. His words are the very words of life. Listen to him! Let his word and his wisdom be your life and salvation. Your desires are broken and twisted and turned in on themselves – if you live by those desires you will die by those desires. But his way is right and leads to life. Listen to him. Follow him. He is a Wonderful Counsellor.

And he is

## **ii. Mighty God**

Motyer suggests here the translation “Warrior God”. If you look up the Hebrew word in the dictionary it says:

powerful; by implication, warrior, tyrant:—champion, chief,.. giant, man, mighty (man, one), strong (man), valiant man.<sup>2</sup>

Some kind of man – and God. A God who becomes a man and does for us what we could never do for ourselves and who pay for what we have done in his body on the cross. A God-man who defeats the enemy of sin and death and who slaps the sword out of the devil’s hand and who breaks down the door of the dungeon and who sets the captives free. That’s who Jesus is! The Warrior God! The Mighty God! Our Chief, our Champion and our Lord.

Thirdly, Isaiah says that he is:

## **iii. Everlasting Father**

The Old Testament doesn’t have a fully developed theology of the Trinity but all the pieces are there. Isaiah says that somehow a human baby will be born who is a real baby and yet also somehow one with God the Father. That’s hard to understand and yet, that’s what the Bible says – that’s what Jesus says.

I and the Father are one. (John 10:30 ESV)

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<sup>2</sup>Strong’s Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary of the Old Testament, s.v. “paragraph 2.

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9 ESV)

Jesus said that. Is it complicated? Yes its complicated but it is also absolutely marvellous. In some wonderful, mysterious way, the Everlasting God took on human flesh and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory – the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth. That is a mystery – but that is the Gospel and that is the heart of the miracle that we celebrate at Christmas.

God has come to us! God will rule over us as one of us – who can understand it!

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Romans 11:33 ESV)

I don’t fully understand it – but I am resting and rejoicing in it. God in Christ will rule over us, as one of us, on the earth, for all eternity. Thanks be to God!

Fourthly and lastly, Isaiah says that he is the:

#### **iv. Prince of Peace**

He is the one who makes our peace with God. That’s almost a summary of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul said:

we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1 ESV)

He got that from Isaiah who said:

he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace (Isaiah 53:5 ESV)

Jesus is our peace!

Jesus paid the debt that we owe God! He absorbed the curse of God upon human sin! On the cross Jesus drank the cup of human trespass to the dregs. He became sin and he bore the wrath of God against sin. And he said:

“It is finished,” (John 19:30 ESV)

It is done. There is no more. If you are in Christ you will never taste even a drop of the wrath of God against sin. It has been satisfied now and you are at peace. No longer a sinner on the stand you are a son or a daughter at the table.

You are welcome now - and you are home now - with God and with one another – FOREVER.

That’s why Christmas is a really big deal. Because it changes everything. It is a total turn around for us. When things were at their worst – when it couldn’t have been any darker – the light of God came shining in! God took the field for our salvation! God defeated our enemy, God broke every chain, paid every debt and in his own body, brought us home.

What more could he have done? What more is there to say? That is the essence of the Gospel. That is the good news of Christmas – now go and spread the word.

Thanks be to God. Let’s pray together.