

The People who Walked in Darkness have Seen a Great Light

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[0 : 00] Well, we call this series The Gospel According to Isaiah, and I hope tonight we can see why, or perhaps we will by the end see why that is.

Our reading is one of the best-known passages in the book of Isaiah, isn't it? Perhaps if you've been in church any number of years, you've heard it every Christmas time. Or if not, we owe, don't we, George Frederick Handel a great debt in setting these words to a majestic soundtrack in his masterpiece, The Messiah.

And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

I won't sing it. Perhaps some of us have got it playing in our heads. If not, you're missing out, but you get the gist. One of the benefits of going through a book bit by bit, as we normally do, as we are in Isaiah, is that we get to put the bits we know best back into their context.

If you took all of the jewels off the imperial state crown, that's the crown that you normally see when the king is wearing a crown, they would still be beautiful and precious stones, wouldn't they?

[1 : 21] But set in the crown, where they are made to be seen, they are breathtaking and priceless. And so tonight, I hope that we can take in the wonder and the power of these words that have given hope and light to millions as we see them in their proper place in Isaiah's prophecy.

And so think back two weeks, if you were here, when Isaiah lifted the curtain and dropped us back into history, we saw in chapters 7 and 8 that the background to Isaiah's ministry is a country and a capital, Judah and Jerusalem, in total freefall.

This is the context. News came that two of Judah's enemies had teamed up to invade, remember? And we read the hearts of Ahaz, that's the king, and of his people were shaken as trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

But the Lord sent Isaiah, didn't he, with a message of hope, say to the king this, Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood, he said.

That invasion will not take place, it will not happen. What a wonderful promise and a message of hope to a fearful people.

[2 : 48] Then he said these faithful words. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

All you have to do is trust me, says the Lord. Put your faith in me, and that thing that you fear most will not happen. But did Ahaz trust him?

No, he rejected, he thrust away, didn't he, God's promise, comfort, and hope. With the result, we saw that something even worse than he feared would come instead. Syria and Israel were two big fish in the near eastern pond, but there was a bigger fish coming.

Assyria, that empire was on the rise, and like a river bursting its banks, said Isaiah, the Assyrian empire would flood over Syria and Israel.

And if that's where it stopped, Judah would have been safe. But because Ahaz the king did not trust the Lord to save them, instead, said Isaiah, Assyria would just keep coming, and Judah would be crushed as well.

[4 : 00] But through the storm clouds, we get rays of sunlight breaking through in Isaiah, and tonight we see that again. Chapter 8 keeps getting darker, but by the end, Isaiah is promising a bright new dawn for God's people on the other side of their darkness.

So let's pick up the thread in verse 19 of chapter 8, and see firstly how to walk in darkness. How to walk in darkness.

Last time we saw God's people clinging on to a false political hope. This time they are clinging on to a false spiritual hope. So they're being told, no, you're not talking to the right people.

Okay, the real breakthrough is going to come when you get in touch, not with the kings of foreign countries, but with the dead. But Isaiah shows us the irony of that, verse 19.

When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?

[5 : 06] Consult God's instruction and the testimony of his warning. So hang on, he says, can't you see if you listen to that and you try and contact the dead and buy into that false spiritual light?

You're actually digging yourself into an even deeper hole. Isn't it enough that you're not trusting God, that you're now going to go behind his back and try and get in touch with the spirits instead?

Or trying to. Anyway, Isaiah's parody of the mediums is pretty close to the bone, isn't it? They whisper and mutter, he says. You can hardly make out what they're going on about.

And what you do catch is utter nonsense. So forget that, he says. Should not a people inquire of their God? Consult God's instruction.

That's literally his Torah and the testimony. That is his covenant. Open the book, he says. And there you will find in black and white, clear as day, the hope and comfort and promise that you need to go forward.

[6 : 14] Open God's word, he says, and live by it. The irony is that if they had done that sooner, they would not be in this mess in the first place.

So now you are in a pit of your own making, says Isaiah. Don't dig yourself down even deeper. If there was ever a time to open the instruction manual, it's now.

I don't know about you. I think it's incredibly gracious of God to even remind them of his word, even after they've already deliberately rejected his promises.

It would be perfectly fair of God, wouldn't it, to let them keep digging. But now he sends Isaiah to them to say again, there is still time to change, still time to do it differently.

And now I don't know if anyone's ever said to you personally, let's contact the dead. I wouldn't totally be surprised. I think there's probably more of that going on than we often think.

[7 : 23] Ouija boards, tarot cards, that sort of thing for fun. I know some extremely unlikely people who once went to spiritualist meetings for a while, where they met mediums who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead.

That kind of thing can tempt people who wouldn't normally look twice at spiritual things. What's the temptation? Well, to feel closer to someone that you've lost, to receive guidance or help in a time of distress or desperation.

You people who are desperate and lost in life will try things that we, and they perhaps, would be surprised to find themselves doing. Remember Saul, Israel's first king, in his desperation as he tried to cling on to power.

This is exactly where he turned. He'd originally kicked all the mediums out of the land. But now in his dark night of the Saul, he sends his guys to go and find him one. In secret, he goes and Saul gets this woman to bring the prophet Samuel back.

And now you can read all about that later in 1 Samuel 28, but suffice to say, that even though Saul did get to speak with Samuel, he was very much the worst for it.

[8 : 44] You friends, I think the question of whether or not that stuff works is beside the point. You people I've known who've tried that kind of thing find it very convincing.

They've raved about it. But whatever was going on, we know that it wasn't from God. And we know that because God says explicitly not to get involved in that.

He warns us off of it. And which in a world of spiritual forces, some of which we know are dark and evil, makes whatever does go on extremely dangerous.

So don't be naive. Don't be deceived by that kind of new-agey, occult world, even just to see what it's like. And perhaps we don't feel like we need to kind of hear that.

Or perhaps that doesn't need to be said. But in my experience, it's the things that we don't think need to be said that sometimes are the most dangerous.

[9 : 48] The things we take for granted that can easily perhaps get behind the defenses. So let me say that. And let me say also that when you boil it down, getting into that stuff is as simple, isn't it, as putting our trust in a false spiritual hope rather than in God and his word to help and guide you, which we all know is not beyond us to do, even if we don't take it this far.

There is real spiritual darkness. It can get its hooks in. Indeed, Isaiah says those who sell those fake spiritual experiences that are not God's word, they end up swallowed up by that darkness.

Verse 20. It says if anyone does not speak according to this word, that is what he's just said about consulting God's book, they have no light of dawn.

His finger is specifically pointing at those who turn others to fake spirituality. So it's those who tell you to do that. Verse 19. Who is calling out.

And we've seen this distinction before that I think is helpful in the way that God deals with false teachers and the falsely taught. So Jesus was ever so patient and gentle, wasn't he, with those who had been misled.

[11 : 16] But with those who had misled them, he was harsh and brutal. He cursed them. Woe to the Pharisees and scribes, he says.

And Isaiah unpacks that really graphically, doesn't he, how false teachers, teachers of false spiritual experiences, now and if they don't repent for eternity, will live in constant distress and hunger, their hearts shaken and starved of life.

He points out, doesn't he, their anger and their hostility towards the true God, how they curse him and they curse his rule, and how threatening and how dark life really seems to them.

So they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom. Only that. And their final judgment, they will be thrust into utter darkness.

Be in no doubt, brothers and sisters, that there is real spiritual darkness at work in those who point people away from God and his inscripturated word, his written word in the Bible, and his living and incarnate word, the Lord Jesus Christ, and instead point people to false spiritual hope and guidance and comforts.

[12 : 46] It sometimes says, isn't it, that when people stop believing in God, it's not that they believe in nothing, it's that they'll believe in anything. I think that's true, isn't it? We look at our world and it's perhaps harmless or silly even, some of it might seem.

Really, these people are clawing at the walls to escape a darkness that they are only digging themselves and others deeper down into. I wonder whether tonight some of us know that darkness.

And perhaps you find yourself tonight living in it. As I say, those who lead people astray from God have it worse, but those who follow still live under that shadow of God's wrath and that heaviness and distress and darkness in their hearts.

If that's you tonight, or perhaps you know someone who it is or someone who's getting tangled up in that or trying that out, whatever's led to that point, desperation, loss, grief, fear, Isaiah says there is hope for you and a way out of that.

And he tells us exactly where it's found, doesn't he, verse 20? Consult God's instruction. You're in the right place tonight with an open Bible in front of you.

[14 : 17] Let me tell you, there's no secret formula or kind of secret knowledge for exercising demons that they teach you in seminary. Only the word of God chases away the darkness and shines light into shadows and satisfies the heart and frees us from distress.

So let's see, secondly then, in his word, where to see a great light. Isaiah seems to kind of U-turn, doesn't he, at the start of chapter 9? Nevertheless, he says, there will be no more gloom for those who are in distress.

And our commentators wonder where this kind of sudden shift in tone comes from. Now, it could be that now he's speaking specifically about those who had blindly followed into the darkness rather than kind of boldly striding into it and bringing others along with them.

It could be simply that having showed the hopelessness of living in darkness, he's now shining a new ray of light into the picture that changes the game entirely.

There was and would have been no light of dawn for them. They would have been thrust into utter darkness had the light of verse 2 not come.

[15 : 36] Now, whichever it is, it's clear, isn't it, that the dark clouds of chapter 8 now give way to a glorious light in chapter 9.

But surprisingly, that sun rises fast in the north. In the past, he, that is the Lord, humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in future, he will honor Galilee of the nations by the way of the sea beyond the Jordan.

Now, we're possibly so used to hearing these words at Christmastime, we sort of skip over them to get to the really good stuff. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and to us a child is born, and a son is given.

But these are strange and important words. Right? Just stick with me a minute. Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes of Israel. Their land was in the very north of the northern kingdom.

Now, this is where our context comes in, right? Remember the dilemma of chapters 7 and 8. The king of Judah, that is the southern kingdom, was terrified at the thought of an invasion from Israel, that is, the northern kingdom.

[16 : 53] So the place that Isaiah says that this new dawn of hope will rise isn't in their own country. It's in their estranged family's backyard.

Right? It would be a bit like saying that the heir to the British throne is going to come from Beverly Hills, not Buckingham Palace. It would be scandalous, wouldn't it? So why does Isaiah say it?

Well, those areas that he's talking about, the commentators point out, were the first to be eaten by the big fish. So the first to fall to Assyria.

Isaiah calls that region Galilee of the nations. And a guy called Alec Mateer, who Donald and I are both relying on for some of the detail of these chapters, points out that nowhere in any ancient writing at this time, before or after, is Galilee called of the nations.

But this is what Isaiah calls it, occupied Galilee, we might say. So his point seems to be that bright hope and comfort would come from the very first kind of patch of God's territory to fall to its enemies.

[18 : 11] But if that sounds well and good, pause and ask, what comfort would that be to you in the southern kingdom, living in fear of your northern neighbors?

In what way would it be good news that God was sending a new dawn in a land that wanted to invade your land? Now, if your hope is in kind of human political or fake spiritual solution, that is not good news.

If the dimensions of your hope are kind of fixed in this worldly terms, that is not good news. But if your hope is in the living God and his eternal promises, this is wonderful good news.

Why is that? Because this is the answer to God's promise through the prophets that the now divided kingdom would be united again when the darkness which sits so heavy on the north would be chased away by the dawning of a king for all God's people.

So that as the promised light spreads south from Galilee into Israel and down into Judah, then it would come true that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

[19 : 37] And on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. He goes on to spell that out. The nation once divided and conquered would be reunited and enlarged, verse 3.

When the heavy hand of oppressive human regimes and spiritual forces would be broken and lifted, verse 4. When the threat and the presence of conflict and fighting would be no more, verse 5.

When even the relics and the stuff and the memory of war would be burned on a bonfire and turned to ash and forgotten. So it's a promise not that peace would ultimately come by the enemy being crushed, but that ultimately the two sides of a family that have been at each other's throats would be reunited and reconciled.

Isaiah is promising a new dawn for all God's people. The dimensions of this hope are mapped onto eternity, not a human geographical or political map of the earth.

But what could bring these people together again and stop the fighting? What or who could bring peace on earth, new hope for the future, a way forward out of darkness?

[21 : 03] Well, having set the scene, let's put the crown jewel back in place, verses 6 and 7, and see this priceless beauty. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

This promise of a new dawn, the hope of future peace and victory rests on a child, on a son who was a king, no less a king from David's family.

David was the first king chosen by God to reign over his united kingdom. So in some ways this is the promise of a new David, restoring what his ancestor had once ruled over, but to the power of infinity, of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom forever. forever. Those are things that not even Israel's great king David had achieved or his son Solomon after him.

[22 : 39] So this would have been a strange and obscure promise for Isaiah's first hearers. I don't know what they would have made of this. I think they would have been scratching their heads.

An eternal, even a divine king who would rise from Galilee, banish spiritual darkness, unite God's divided kingdom, and reign with perfect justice forever.

But who is this exalted king? Well, the people of Isaiah's day, Isaiah himself even couldn't have told us his name, but we know his name.

And if we are Christians tonight, he is our king. Because 700 years later, he stepped into history. To us, a child was born.

To us, a son was given. We've got a great book at home, the illustrated Westminster Shorter Catechism.

[23 : 43] Me and Caleb do it together. Mainly we talk about the pictures, but he's beginning to get some of the words as well, because the pictures kind of beautifully tie into and draw out the truth of the questions in really simple ways.

So if you were to ask Caleb, who is the redeemer of God's elect? He would tell you in his own words quite simply, baby Jesus.

Because on the opposite side of the page to that question is a manger scene. Mary and Joseph standing over him at the Magi kneeling in adoration and offering their treasures to him.

The shepherds gathered there with their sheep, which always get a mention as well. And in the middle, a manger. I think that's a really helpful reminder to me, hope to us, that these verses in Isaiah are deep enough for an elephant to swim in, but clear enough for a child to paddle in.

Someone like Alex could spend days or weeks or months unpacking the glorious beauty of these titles, wonderful counselor, almighty God, or reveling in these promises, but a two-year-old can tell you who it's talking about.

[25 : 06] Here's the full answer to that question. Who is the redeemer of God's elect? The only redeemer of God's elect is the Lord, Jesus Christ, who being the eternal son of God, became man, and so was and continues to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever.

That's certainly where Isaiah gets us, isn't it? In verse 7, the mighty God reigning eternally in the person of his son born a human being into David's family to sit on the throne of his kingdom.

But it's not wrong, is it, to say this baby Jesus? The simplicity of these verses, I think, are part of their beauty, aren't they? That there's really no one else that Isaiah could be talking about.

For some of the other prophecies that we've met in this book, there are stages of fulfillment or kind of stopgaps that hint at their fullest fulfillment in Christ. So the sign of Emmanuel in chapter 7, and as Donald helped us to see, a child that was to be born in Isaiah's own lifetime as a sign to the king of God's word.

Or the day of the Lord that we met back in chapter 3, and as we saw the prospect of an Assyrian invasion that was going to come only years later, they were stepping stones that got God's people from Isaiah's prophecies to Christ via their immediate future.

[26 : 37] But there are no stepping stones this time. Isaiah just launches us forward over 700 years to the birth of Christ and his ministry where?

In Galilee. Of all places, Jesus went there, said Matthew, we heard earlier, to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah.

The people living in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of the shadow of death. The light has dawned, says Matthew, because from that time on, Jesus began to preach, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And as he journeyed south in the final year of his ministry and set his face towards Jerusalem, that daylight and the dawning of his kingdom spread down into the heart of the kingdom.

and as darkness fell, as he hung on the cross and as king took the punishment and the curse for his people's sins, light and life rose and shone in the hearts of his followers a new dawn and a new start with God and with his king.

[27 : 53] And when he rose from the dead, he gathered his people and what did he do? Taught them for 40 days about the kingdom of God. and then he ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of his father with all authority in heaven and on earth given to him.

So that as we sit here tonight, brothers and sisters, the power and authority, the kingdom, the government that dawned on the world some 2,000 years ago still today rests on his almighty shoulders.

Of the greatness of his government and of peace, there is no end. So what does that mean for me and you sitting here tonight?

Isaiah spoke almost 3,000 years ago now. What do these words have for us? Well, in Jesus Christ, these words mean that in our spiritual darkness and lostness, we have a light.

In our conflict with our great enemies, our struggle with temptation and sin, our resistance to the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, our perseverance in a fallen world, in that conflict, your everyday conflict, we have victory and joy in his victory.

[29 : 27] In our fraught and our sometimes tense relationships, we have unity, a bond of peace, divisions healed, walls of hostility broken down.

In our desperation, we have hope. In our fear, we have comfort. In our wandering, we have guidance. Because in and over our world and our lives, we have a wonderful counselor, a mighty God, an everlasting father, a prince of peace, God most wise, most strong, most loving, most merciful, incarnate, and seated on the throne forever as our eternal king.

For Isaiah and the people of his day, that was a distant hope, but not for you and me. It's close enough to touch. There are a lot of remarkable words in these verses that we could spend time on, but I think some of the best words are the shortest words in verse six.

Just look there. What are the best words in that verse? I think it's those two little words to us, to us, because without them, none of the other words would matter, would they?

Jesus could be a wonderful counselor, a prince of peace, but unless God in love had given him to us, he would not be our wonderful counselor, our prince of peace.

[31 : 13] It would have been a few raised eyebrows if Donald this morning had announced the birth of a little girl not to Hannah and DJ, but rather said to us, a daughter has been born. She's not our daughter, is she?

She's their daughter, but this is our Christ child. This is our baby Jesus. this is our king and savior.

To us, a child has been born. To us, a son has been given. So if he is yours tonight, if you have laid hold of him and claimed him as your own, given to you and for you in love to be your eternal king and savior, if he is yours, rejoice in him.

Isaiah reaches for the greatest depths and reaches of joy that he can rejoice as in the harvest, he says, when the food comes in. Rejoice as in after a great victory on the battlefield and all the treasure rolls in.

Rejoice. I would say like you've won the lottery. Though I shouldn't say that. Rejoice like the best thing has happened to you. My life is changed for good.

[32 : 28] Rejoice like that, says Isaiah, in his rule and reign and in his victory. The peace and the fullness and the joy of these verses, they are yours, brothers and sisters.

They are yours tonight and rely on him. Rely on him. Listen to his words. Don't turn to the darkness. Don't resort to fake light sources.

Live by his word under his good and loving rule. Consult and open and read his instruction and his testimony. And if you're not sure tonight where you stand, ask yourself, simply, is he mine?

Is he mine? Have I claimed him as my own? Have I laid hold of him by faith? Is Jesus to me just a child, a son, a king, a person or a figure, an idea, or is he my king, my counselor, my peace, my God, my light, my savior?

If he's not yours yet, if you cannot yet say that, make that true tonight. Take hold of him by faith. God has given him for us. So take him as your own and he will be yours and then you will know that he was born for you to chase away your darkness, to still your heart, to bring you back to God and unite you with his people and to rule over your life with perfect love, rightness, and justice forever.

[34 : 08] Would he be your wonderful counselor, your mighty God, your everlasting father, your prince of peace tonight? Let's pray that for all of us together now.

Let's pray. Amen. Gracious God and loving heavenly father, how we thank you that in love you sent your one and only son into this world of darkness.

Our father, we thank you that in love you knew us before we ever knew you and you loved us before we had ever claimed Christ as our own or loved him or followed him.

We thank you that you sent him for us and that he in love gave himself for us on the cross that we might be made right with you and reconciled with you and your people.

So our father, we pray, grant us that faith that would make Christ our own tonight. Lord, we pray that for each of us he wouldn't just be someone out there but that he would be made to live in our hearts by your spirit and that you would give us that faith to claim him and that by your spirit, your spirit would take the things of Christ and apply them to us.

[35 : 39] Lord, we need you because we do live in darkness that is our natural habitat but the sin in our hearts is so strong and we need your light to guide, to help, to change us, to give us hope and peace and certainty.

So come, Lord, we pray, be our light we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.