

Well, good morning; how are we? Good, good! I want to give a quick shout-out to my people joining us in our online community! I'm so glad you're joining us in worship and studying God's Word from wherever and whenever you're at. Well, if I haven't been able to meet you yet, my name is Doug; I'm one of the Pastors here, and I would love to connect with you on the patio after we worship together. So, be sure to come and say hi.

We're continuing in our current series called "Christmas Hope." Today, we're going to be diving into Isaiah chapter 9, so if you've got your Bibles, which I hope you do, let's turn there together and dive into the text.

Before we get too far, I'd like to set up the scene that we are entering into. In the previous chapter we see that a large portion of the people of Israel had disregarded the Lord and turned to things of the world for their hope and guidance. There had been a multi-century war effort by the Assyrians to make their way down through what would be modern Lebanon and Israel and into Egypt. Now, distress, conflict, fear, anguish, anxiety, and hopelessness would have been prevalent amongst the people of Israel for all of those years of Assyria's dominance, except for one 40-year period of relief under the reign of Hezekiah. Through all of this there was a remnant, a small amount of Israelites, who were still considered "disciples of God." They were loyal to the Lord compared to those who were hardened. These people were trying to make an effort of faithfulness, and that's who Isaiah is speaking to.

In our opening verse the prophet Isaiah tries to give a reassuring word to the people of Israel. He tells them, "darkness and despair isn't gonna go on forever." He goes on to say that the northern portion of the promised land, and he specifically names Zebulun and Naphtali, "will be humbled."

In other words, the Assyrians are going to come down and they're going to bring war to their cities.

This northern region of Galilee would have been the first cities that invading nations would have come against Israel. These two territories were seized by Tiglath-Pileser in his campaign against Israel in 733 BC. Not long after Isaiah would have shared this news. Zebulun and Naphtali was near the sea of Galilee and the small town of Nazareth would have been in the region of Zebulun.

So, here we have in Isaiah 9 verse 1 the prophet telling the people, darkness and despair isn't going to go on forever, yes, there will be some humbling of the people by way of an invading force, which is a typical judgement tool by God, but then Isaiah gives a little more info about how this darkness and despair will be a matter of the past, he says at the end of verse 1, "but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory.

² The people who walk in darkness
will see a great light.

For those who live in a land of deep darkness,
a light will shine.

³ You will enlarge the nation of Israel,
and its people will rejoice.

They will rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest
and like warriors dividing the plunder.

⁴ For you will break the yoke of their slavery
and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.

You will break the oppressor's rod,
just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.

⁵ The boots of the warrior
and the uniforms bloodstained by war
will all be burned.

They will be fuel for the fire.

⁶For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷His government and its peace
will never end.

He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor
David
for all eternity.

The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen! (Isaiah 9:1b-7).

I love the end of verse 1, and once again it has my favorite word in the Bible, "but!" "but there will be a time in the future..."

Currently there is darkness and despair. But, hope contrasts the present despair. The people were walking in darkness, they were living in a land of deep darkness, some translations call it the "land of the shadow of death." But hope, contrasts the present despair, he says, "BUT! This land will be filled with glory! These people who are in despair will see a great light! A light will shine in the land!

Are you catching what is happening here? In the land around Galilee, which is Zebulun and Naphtali, it's full of darkness and despair, but it's in Galilee that Jesus starts His ministry. Jesus, who is referred to as the Light of the World, is raised in Galilee and does ministry in Galilee. So, yes! The land would be filled with glory!

Now, honestly, the people that Isaiah is talking to, they don't get that. You and I have the privilege of history to teach us. We're seeing the end of the story they were seeing the beginning.

Now, the darkness and despair represents the lostness of a soul apart from God. They walk around in darkness and they cannot find their way. In chapter 8, Isaiah says the people were being told to rely on mediums and magicians, they were not living in the glory of God but the darkness of the world.

But see, this shouldn't be surprising. Especially for us. Clearly, for humanity the lights have gone out, and for many, without a reference point to navigate from.

Since Adam and Eve, and aside from a few special circumstances where God revealed Himself to individuals and to His chosen people Israel for periods of time, man has not walked in the light.

They've not experienced the beauty of the Lord and His ways. People are in absolute abject darkness that renders them completely incapacitated spiritually. In fact, the scripture says this darkness is actually spiritual death.

And the cause of this darkness—The reason the world is engulfed in the shadow of death is because of the consequences of sin.

In the beginning God created light and then He created life. And for a while, we don't know how long for sure, God and man walked in the light together in a perfect relationship. And then when Adam and Eve chose to abandon their life with God in the light, for a life of rebellion against God that relationship became clouded in darkness that engulfed all of God's creation and separated mankind from God.

Darkness infiltrated the world and every person has been born as a slave to the darkness and death because of sin. And so friends, that's the present despair the world has found itself in and still finds itself in.

Sin entered the world and its darkness spread with cancerous destruction through every part of who we are. Physically, emotionally, relationally, psychologically, and especially spiritually we were stained with sin to the core of our being. That's the meaning of the word depravity--there is no part of who we are or the habitat in which we live that is not stained and soaked by sin.

And that is why we live in a broken world. It touches every person, in every age, on every continent. It's the reason we have to deal with the loss of a loved one. It's the reason so many people are depressed and discouraged and sick. It's the reason crime and injustice exist.

It doesn't matter who we are or where we live we cannot escape the fall out of sin in this world. And as a result, despair has captured every one of our hearts at some level and we have been in desperate need of hope.

But see, hope contrasts the present despair.

You might be sensing that foreboding shadow of darkness upon your life even as you sit here right now. A feeling of hopelessness or anxiety because your life seems to be spinning out of your control. That is so common in our day and age. We try to push through, we try to cover it up. I mean right now it's Christmas! The most wonderful time of the year they say. Well, shoot, the last 3 weeks in my house has been awful! With my youngest having a fever and his soccer team disbanding, to my middle son crushing his leg and missing the first half of basketball season, to me not be able to move because of a back injury. It's like, yeah, it's a real wonderful time!

There was an article written in Great Britain this past week that not only demonstrated that Christmas is one of the most stressful times of the year but it is also one of the most dangerous times of the year.

- Almost 20 percent of people find the experience of hosting guests and preparing for Christmas meals and festivities "completely overwhelming."

- Three percent of people suffer an electric shock due to badly wired Christmas lighting and one in 50 fall out of the loft trying to get the tinsel and decorations down.
- Some 2.6 million people have even fallen off a stool or ladder while hanging up the decorations.
- 700,000 people have been injured in a sale rush while trying to snag a bargain.¹

Merry Christmas.

Yes, for many, this time of year comes with a lot of gifts. But for others, they're getting different types of gifts. Some people are getting gifts of unresolved family drama. A reoccurring gift of grief that circles back around as your heart aches at what used to be. Or the pain that comes with the loss of a loved one. This past week you may have heard that an Osprey went down in Japan with 8 servicemembers on it. Tragically, one of those was the son of a missionary couple connected to the ministry my family and I served alongside overseas, they lost their son this week in that crash. Christmas will be painful for them and his young wife.

We see it. We see the darkness and despair all around us. But, I love what this young airman's dad said. "We grieve but not as those with no hope. He is with Jesus."

Friends, Isaiah's passage here, he's proclaiming something. Hope is proclaimed in this passage. And this hope is a gift from God. It is not something the Israelites deserve. It's not something they have earned. They're in utter darkness. Just like the world around us. But, then God says, "they will see a great light."

¹ "Is Christmas Making You Ill?"

Have you ever been somewhere that's super dark? I'm finding myself there more and more as I get older. In the middle of the night, I find myself stumbling in the darkness trying to find the bathroom. There's usually a little pin light coming from somewhere that ends up catching my eye and helping me navigate myself to where I need to be. That little, little light is a gift! Otherwise we'd have a mess on our hands!

Friends, to the Israelites Isaiah proclaims hope. To you, he proclaims hope. I want you to know right now, hope is real and hope is available. It's not just for other people. It's for you!

You can say, "How do you know?" "You don't know my circumstances." Or, "You don't know what I've done." You're right, I probably don't. But I do believe this. I believe: Hope cannot exist where a need for hope does not. The fact that you need hope is proof that there is hope to be found. And that my friend is very good news!

Hope Contrasts the Present Despair.

But hope doesn't just contrast the present despair. Hope always points to a future resolution.

That's what makes hope so important. Hope sees an answer to the Despair and believes in that answer. That's why hope is such a powerful thing. I mean, even hope that is misdirected and misguided is powerful. Without hope, people quickly give up and give in to despair. Without hope people stop trying, or at best just go through the motions. So they grasp on to something.

Hope is a powerful engine that can get us going. I mean, don't you remember the famous Tickle Me Elmo Mania of '96? According to one magazine, "Many parents literally fought other parents in North American toy stores to purchase one of the toys for Christmas. The short supply of the toy, due to unexpected demand, meant that stores hiked the price on the dolls drastically.

Newspaper classifieds even sold the plush toy for hundreds of U.S. dollars. Some reports said the \$28.99 toy fetched as much as \$1500.

A clerk at the Wal-Mart in New Brunswick was among those injured by "Elmo-mania". A crowd of 300 stampeded into the store on December 14, 1996; spotting him with one of the remaining toys, he "was pulled under and trampled." According to sources, the clerk "suffered a pulled hamstring, injuries to his back, jaw and knee, a broken rib and a concussion.

Hope motivates us to do all kinds of things. It prolongs endurance. It makes us keep on keeping on, even in the worse of circumstances.

Someone once said, "There is no medicine like hope—no incentive so great, and no tonic so powerful as the expectation of something better tomorrow."

By definition, Hope is a confident expectation in a certain future.

When I say, "I hope the Broncos will beat the chargers today. Or, "I hope it snows Christmas Eve." This is nothing more than wishful thinking in the face of all that we cannot control.

But, for Christians, Hope is a future certainty grounded in a present reality.

A reality that is more real than the present despair you and I may be experiencing. The reality is the faithfulness of God's promises and the knowledge of God's presence. Since the Fall of mankind and the inauguration of darkness, death and despair, God began to make promises that offered hope.

God has always been a God of hope. Even at the very onset of this pervasive darkness. Even before the sentence of death was given to Adam and Eve, God gave them hope.

In Genesis chapter 3, verse 15, God said, speaking to the serpent who deceived Eve, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and hers; He will crush your head and you will strike His heel."

Immediately our God demonstrates His nature of goodness, abounding with hope when He says, "the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent, while the serpent is striking his heel."

This was a prophecy about Jesus Christ, referencing Him as the "seed" of the woman and the fact that although Satan would deliver a blow to Jesus, in effect the crucifixion would be nothing more than a bruise to the heel of Christ, as Jesus would overcome it victoriously by rising from the dead. By taking that blow, Jesus would himself deliver a fatal blow to the head of Satan and the consequences of sin.

And then, God continued to pour out his promises of hope regarding His solution, not the world's ideas to our sin problem. He made covenants, contracts with Abraham, and Jacob, and David, and through His prophets He foretold hundreds of years in advance that He would one day redeem mankind as He restores His creation back to its pre-fallen state

This is what Isaiah the prophet refers to when he writes in verse 2, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

The darkness that sin brought upon mankind has been invaded with a divine light of hope and that hope was the seed of the woman, the birth of the child we read about in verse 6.

If you would, turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 1, beginning in verse 1.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things have been made; without Him nothing was made that has been made."

Before anything existed in the universe, God, through His eternal Word, spoke everything into being. In Verse 4 we read, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

The Word is described personally now as "Him" In "Him" was life. And that life was the light of men. The life that God breathed into mankind, also came through the Word. And then he makes a connection between our God given life and the LIGHT. The life God gave to us was the light of men. Let's go to verse 5, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it."

Darkness and light cannot exist together. Whenever God shines light into the dark places of our soul, darkness cannot overcome it. It must submit.

Light that will dispel the darkness. Light that can take us out of darkness and death caused by sin and give us new life. When you add it all together it is hope and expectation. Not wishful thinking. Not an ignorant, naïve desire. No, this hope is based on the absolute truth that God has invaded human time and space and began to implement the plan He had designed even before the very beginning.

What breaks my heart for so many of those Israelites and honestly, so many of the people all around the world today, is that they have walked away from the Hope—the very solution to their despair. They look to the world for comfort. For a wish.

But the hope that is proclaimed by Isaiah in this prophecy and that we can see here in verses 12 & 13 is sure, "Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to be called the children of God.—children born not of natural descent, not of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

To those who received the gift of light God had offered and believed in Him who is God's Hope for the world, He gives the right to be called children of God. That's a picture of new life. As Scripture says, we die to self and to sin and to this world, and we are born by the Spirit of God into a new family. An eternal, heavenly family. As darkness is crucified, light is born in us.

And so every person is left with a decision to make.

We can receive the light of the world, our only hope and walk in this life-giving light, Or we can continue to walk in darkness and despair.

The hope has been proclaimed. Will you accept it?

Many settle for the temporal hope offered in this world. It's the hope of change. We believe something better is in store for us. That better job. That better relationship. That better home or that change in circumstance. And to some extent it works for a little while. But the silent truth is this. When our Hope is limited to the temporal things of this world it will eventually fail us.

Jesus told a story about two builders. One built his house on the sand and the other on the rock. When the storms came and the wind and rain beat down on the houses, the one built on the rock stood firm, but the one built on the sand fell with a great crash.

When you stop and evaluate the foundation of your life, what are you building upon?

What are putting your hope in? Even believers need to ask this question. The Christian life is more than just escaping Hell and getting a free ticket into heaven. It's about walking in the light and living with the expectant hope of Christ day by day.

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good." Titus 2:11-14

Friends, our blessed Hope is more than a circumstance that goes our way. It is a person. The person Jesus Christ. His birth. His life. His death and His resurrection.

If you are here today and you have never put your hope in Christ alone as your Savior and Lord, I invite you today to stop trusting in what this world can offer. When the final storm of your life comes and you face the end of your life. Will you be able to withstand the winds and rain of God's judgment?

Christians today have hope not only in the birth of the child Jesus, but in His second coming as well. He will return and He will not come as a humble baby heading for death on a cross. This time he will come arraigned in glory and majesty and power. He will come to establish righteousness and to judge justly.

To all who receive Him and believe in His name, He will be the life that is the light. But to those who reject him, He will be their judge, exposing the fact that they deserve the eternal punishment they will get.

The question for you today is this...will you place your hope in Christ?