

What Child Is This? The Child Who Is God

The Grace of God in Christmas (December 17, 2017 Isaiah 9:1-7)

Over the years I have spoken with a number of men and women who have faced impending death and as Dr. Samuel Johnson noted:

Depend upon it sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.

Death does concentrate the mind and cause us to think deeply about our lives.

But the approach of death is not the only time we tend to pause and reflect on our lives.

The end of a year and the approach of a new year is also an opportunity for reflection.

I have found this time of year to lead to an increase in counselling.

Why? Because many hate the way their life has gone.

They have unfulfilled longings, regrets and even fear.

Even many Christians can view their life as something of a disappointment because we are hard-wired to think we have to do something to earn heaven and many feel they are failures. They can think of so many sins. By their own assessment they have not lived great Christian lives.

And they fret about what God might say to them.

Some are even truly worried that when death does come they will **not** hear – well done good and faithful servant.

But the end of the year is not just an opportunity to think of our lives – it is an opportunity to think about **the** one life that removes our fears and disappointments and replaces them with joy.

This morning, I want to talk about the truth that we need not fear because the greatest gift of Christmas is ... grace.

It does not matter how well or how badly any of us have lived our lives – we could never deserve God's grace – His forgiveness, His love, His blessing.

The essence of the Christmas story is that – we are undeserving – but He sends His grace anyway.

Our lives will never match up – but Jesus' did – and that is what matters.

There are many places we could turn to in order to see the grace of God in Christmas – but this morning – I want to look at one of the best-known Christmas passages – Isaiah 9:1-7.

Verse 6 of chapter 9 is probably the best known of these verses – but as I studied this passage one thing struck me – when you look at the carols we sing at Christmas – so many of them are based on these verses – but interestingly verse 6 probably receives less focus than many of the others.

To understand the real impact of this passage – you have to put yourself in the shoes of a citizen of Judah – in the latter half of the eighth century BC.

I am going to spend a little while on this – and put up a couple of maps because we really need to grasp the context.

If you spoke to someone who lived in Jerusalem in those days – they might tell you this.

For years this pesky prophet Isaiah had been turning up telling the nation to repent.

He reminded us of everything the Lord had done for us – and how we had failed to walk in His ways.

Isaiah called us sinful, evil and corrupt. He even called the nation whores and murderers.

He told us that we call evil – good and dark – light.

He was very pointed – unless we repent, God is coming to devour us and make us a waste.

Initially we were worried about this – but then the years went by and no huge disaster appeared so we stopped worrying.

However, when good King Uzziah died – his son Ahaz – who was definitely not good – came to the throne and things got serious. Under this wicked king even I began to see that Isaiah had a point – we were as wicked as any nation.

Then something happened that made everyone in Judah shake like a leaf.

We heard that our brothers in Israel – the northern tribes – had made an alliance with the might of Syria – they had joined forces and were marching against us.

Impending death concentrates the mind. Perhaps this was the judgment of God for our sin.

But surprisingly, Isaiah turned up and said to King Ahaz – don't let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands.

They are **not** what you should fear – you should fear Me.

God said – trust Me – I will shatter both Syria and Israel – and as a sign that I will do this – behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a child and you shall call his name – Immanuel – God with us.

I have to admit that given our sinfulness I was surprised that God would protect us like that – but boy was I glad to hear those words.

However, our King – Ahaz – couldn't bring himself to trust the Lord.

He had to take matters into his own hands.

He emptied out our treasury – sent it to King Tiglath-pileser the king of Assyria – the biggest, baddest superpower in the world of our day and asked him to protect us.

He did – to an extent.

He marched from Assyria – attacked Syria and then invaded the northern kingdom of Israel.

You might think this made us happy.

Two problems. Now Assyria was camped right on our border and making noises about attacking us.

And the prophet Isaiah was angry with us – really angry.

He rolled up and said God had another message for us. We had trusted men rather than the Lord, we had feared kings rather than our God.

Because of that – the day had now come when we are going to learn that the One we should have feared and dreaded was the Lord – not some human army.

God Himself would come against us as a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling, He was going to break us and shatter us.

If we thought Syria was bad and Assyria was worse – that is nothing compared to what God was going to do to us.

He said we will look and all we will see is distress, darkness and gloom.

Even as he said it – I knew he was right – that was what we deserved.

Now we had something to really fear.

So, I hope you can picture the situation. Judah was a nation who kept on rejecting the call of the prophets to repent. They had disobeyed God in every way.

They had spurned God's protection and looked to a vile pagan King for help.

Now they had three angry neighbours and even worse a really angry God.

Things were about as bleak as they could be.

I have labored over this context – what it would be like to be in Judah at this time – just so you can see how unexpected, how stunning, how mind-blowing what happens next is.

When you read Isaiah 1-8 – everything inside us cries out that the book should end after chapter 8.

I don't know where you are at this morning.

I don't know if you are feeling a failure – in your life, in your walk with God.

I don't know if you are fearful – for your future, for our world.

Maybe you see dark clouds around North Korea, or the way our government is going, or the way your life is heading.

Maybe there are times where you wonder if God has withdrawn His love.

I don't know.

What I do know is that chances are your life was not as dark and gloomy as what Judah was facing.

And – although they did not deserve it – the message does not end there.

I also want you to know that the very next words in this book are **not** just for Judah – they are for you this morning.

And they are stunning.

Isaiah 9 verse 1:

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.

Yes you have failed. Yes God is angry, Yes there are consequences for your failures.

Yes you are undeserving.

But – God still has a plan for you.

This is a message of hope – the gloom *will* lift.

Everything about this announcement is surprising. Perhaps the most stunning thing is that it is made at all.

But almost as stunning a surprise is *where* this hope comes from:

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.

Hope is going to come from Zebulun and Naphtali – a region the Jews in Judah regarded with absolute contempt.

Zebulun and Naphtali were the two northern tribes that basically became the region of known as Galilee in the days of Jesus.

But even in Isaiah's day they were regarded with disdain.

Basically, whenever any invading army marched into Palestine – they first places they conquered were Zebulun and Naphtali.

And almost always some of the soldiers stayed and intermarried.

And what is important to note is that when King Ahaz asked Assyria for help in 733BC – Assyria conquered those two tribes – carted off many of the leaders of the people and brought in a collection of Gentile peasants from across the nations – those Jews called mongrels and dogs.

The result was that this area was derisively called – Galilee of the nations – or literally Galilee of the Gentiles.

The southern tribes looked at this area as basically Gentile – a mob of half-breeds – impure – mudbloods.

Over the centuries – the reputation of this area only worsened.

The saying was – nothing good could come from this region (John 1:44–46). It was taken as given that no Prophet or person of significance could ever arise from Galilee (John 7:52).

But here – Isaiah indicates that someone will arise from Galilee of the Gentiles – and will bring blessing to an undeserving people.

In verses 2-7 he tells us what will happen when this person comes.

And what Isaiah says is so certain – that he can write it in the past tense – as if it has already happened – that is how certain these events are.

Look at what he says:

You don't deserve grace – BUT:

Light will displace Darkness 2

Verse 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.

Darkness in the Bible pictures sin and fear and not walking in the ways of God.

Light is a picture of God.

The picture here is that the world lies shrouded in deep darkness and sin and ignorance and fear.

And into this darkness – light dawns.

God Himself will come to His people to drive their sin, and fear and ignorance.

And when this Light comes:

Joy will displace Gloom 3

Verse 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.

Here is Judah – a small nation – surrounded by massive hostile pagan nations.

They live in fear and dread.

When the Light comes – the nation the kingdom will grow – and it will herald the dawning of joy.

Isaiah mentions two of the greatest examples of earthly joy.

The harvest. This Christmas – the most danger we face in terms of food is whether the price of seafood will be exorbitant – or whether we will face indigestion from eating too much.

But in an agricultural society – the harvest literally meant the difference between life and death.

If the soil is good, if you get the early and the latter rains, if the locusts and the pests are controlled – if the crops grow – there is a harvest – there is food – there is life.

The time of harvest is a time of incredible joy. You have food for the year and seed for the next year. This is a time to rejoice.

Similarly, so you know what dividing the spoil means? It means you won the war.

The nation that wants to kill you – you defeated them. It means you live. It means your wife will not be abused and your children will not be sold as slaves.

Think of the scenes we have seen on those old black and white films of the absolute joy when World War II was ended.

There is joy at the harvest and the spoils – because it means life.

Isaiah says – when this Light from Galilee appears – it will herald an even greater joy – the greatest joy anyone can know – joy greater than harvest or victory – because it does not just mean life – it means *eternal* life.

The Light brings life – and when you understand that – there is joy.

But there is more:

Freedom will displace Oppression 4

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.

Ever since Israel entered the Promised Land – they had been besieged by one enemy or another.

The Mesopotamians, the Canaanites, the Midianites, the Amalekites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Philistines, the Egyptians, the Medians, the Persians, the Assyrians.

They were a small nation constantly besieged.

Isaiah says – the Light from Galilee will free you once and for all time from all oppression.

He will break your enemies as God broke the Midianites.

Remember in the days of the Judges – Midian oppressed Israel. Every crop they grew – every sheep they raised – the Midianites stole it.

They were starving and desperate. They just could not break the yoke of the Midianites.

Finally, God raised up a deliverer – Gideon. God whittled down Gideon's huge army to 300 men and used that handful to smash Midian such that they never bothered Israel again.

God's deliverer will do that for His people. He will free His people.

And finally,

Peace will displace War 5

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.

From the moment Adam sinned – the world has not known peace.

There was never been a time without conflict, war, bloodshed and death.

But the Light from Galilee will cause wars to cease.

No more the boots of invaders.

No more blood-soaked clothing.

Fear, death, chaos – it will all end.

Now, the Jews rejoiced at these verses.

They longed for this to come to pass.

But how God would bring them to pass became a matter of debate.

In the years after Isaiah, a number of Jewish scholars linked these verses with the Messiah to come.

But these verses were not the problem.

The problem for the Jews was what to do with the next verses.

Isaiah says all of this will happen:

Because the God-child has come 6-7

Verses 6–7:

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. 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.

Light, Joy, Freedom and Peace – these blessings will flow from the **child** who will come.

This child will be in the line of David – He will be a King. He will be a Son – He will represent God.

He will rule with justice and righteousness. He will bring peace.

The Kingdom He establishes will have no end.

This is some promise.

These are some awesome names with some awesome attributes.

Today, if you ask a Jew – who is this – they will say – we believe this prophecy was fulfilled in King Hezekiah – the son of King Ahaz.

Really?

Hezekiah was not born in Galilee of the Gentiles.

He was never considered to be Mighty God or the Prince of Peace.

In fact, while Hezekiah started well, he finished poorly. He sold Judah out to the Babylonians which ultimately led to their exile and enslavement.

Hezekiah did not establish a kingdom of unending peace and joy and righteousness.

Hezekiah had to be a monumental let down if he was the fulfilment of the promises in these verses.

He did not end war and oppression.

He did not free His people.

He did not establish an eternal kingdom.

Hezekiah was never the great hope of the nations.

Why? Because these verses are meant to point us to someone way beyond any human King.

These are incredible names.

Wonderful Counselor. His counsel and wisdom are perfect. He will speak the words of God. He will bring the light of God to a lost world.

Mighty God. In His person, we have the embodiment of the power and majesty of God. We see Him and we see the Father.

Everlasting Father. His reign will have no end and He will rule over His people with the love of a father. This name speaks of the loving shepherding nature of His rule.

Prince of Peace. He will bring peace – no more will men make war. He will end the cycle of bloodshed and violence.

However you cut it – these are unusual names, titles and expectations.

In fact – when you read the Old Testament – these titles, these attributes, these characteristics – belong to God Himself and no one else.

Taken on face value – Isaiah seems to be saying that in the fullness of time – a child will be born – He will come out of Galilee of the Gentiles – He will be of the line of David – and He will be God Himself.

The God-child will come to bring *Light* and *Joy* and *Freedom* and *Peace* to His people.

He will establish a kingdom of righteousness that will have no end.

He will come to save His people.

A child will do this?

What child is this?

Who could ever embody the lofty prophecies of these verses?

Fast forward a little over 700 years.

A child is conceived – miraculously – of a virgin.

He is of the line of David – but He is also of divine lineage – conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And then this child is born. Luke 2:8–14:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

I hope you heard all the echoes of Isaiah. This child comes and brings – Light, joy, freedom, peace.

He grows to manhood and then after being tested in the wilderness we are told this. Matthew 4:13–17:

And leaving Nazareth [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah

might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew expressly confirms – the One Isaiah spoke of had arrived. Jesus was the child, the Son, the King who will fulfil these promises.

In the New Testament – these seven verses are applied again and again to Jesus. To His birth, to His life, to His death, to His eternal kingdom.

These expectations were almost beyond belief – but the child of Nazareth did fulfil every hope and promise of Isaiah.

Jesus Himself and every Christmas carol writer makes it clear – Jesus is the One Isaiah spoke of.

- **Light.** I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me shall not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (John 8:12)

Jesus came to bring light into the darkness.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... In him was life, and the life was the light of men. John 1:1–4.

The world was dark – sinful – desperate – and He came. He brought the light – the message of God to a lost and desperate world.

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.

When darkness lay upon this earth,
A glorious light did shine;
God sent a Gift of priceless worth
And showed His love divine.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Jesus brought light into darkness.

If the Light had not come – we would stay lost, captive, exiled – there would be no healing.

But Jesus came to save His people – to show them God – to show them the way of salvation.

As well Jesus came to bring:

- **Joy.** I have come, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (John 15:11)

When the angel appeared to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth he said:

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Luke 2:10

The announcement of an impending royal birth brings great joy – to world.

When Wills and Kate announced – we're expecting – it was front page news from that day on.

But here is the announcement of a birth that goes beyond any mere royal birth. This is the announcement of a divine birth.

The One who will save His people.

This is news of the greatest joy imaginable. This joy extends throughout the creation and throughout the heavens.

When I first became a Christian – there were several emotions that just swamped me – relief, freedom – but mostly joy.

Failure, guilt, despair, fear – these are crushing weights.

We know we can never earn our way to heaven.

We know we can never be good enough.

Grace says – you don't have to be good enough because Jesus was good enough.

When you understand this – when you understand that the One who can actually save us has come – then the joy is unspeakable.

Joy, unspeakable joy,
An overflowing well,
No tongue can tell,
Joy, unspeakable joy,
Rises in my soul, never let's me go.

Israel's strength and consolation,

Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Our day of joy is here again,
With love and peace and song;
Come, let us join the angelic strain
With voices clear and strong.

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

If you want a joy that overflows, that is unspeakable, that rises in your soul and never lets you go – then accept the gift of the God-child and know an unstoppable joy.

If you don't have that joy – then perhaps you don't understand Christmas.

He came to bring:

- **Freedom.** Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:29-30)

Jesus came to set the captives free (Luke 4:18).

This goes beyond being freed from the oppression by nations.

He came to remove the yoke of sin and death replace it with the freedom of life in the Spirit.

He breaks the power of sin. He destroys death. He sets the prisoner free.

Bound by sin.

Unable to break free – then **He** comes.

Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
And in His name all oppression shall cease.

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free.
From our fears and sins release us;

Let us find our rest in Thee.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a Child, and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.

Only the God-child born a man can set His people free.

He is the only One who can end the oppression of sin.

And finally – He comes to bring:

- **Peace.** Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. (John 14:27)

Jesus is the Prince of Peace.

When He returns a second time – nation shall never again lift up sword against nation.

He is the One who shall judge between the nations and cause them to beat their swords into ploughshares.

But even more – He comes to bring peace on earth – peace between God and man.

That is the real peace we desperately need.

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.

O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease,
Fill all the world with heaven's peace.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

Hark! the herald angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!

Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.

Believe it or not I restrained myself in quoting Christmas carols based on these seven verses – I had pages more.

But the restraint is limited because I do need to quote two more carols.

They are drawn from verse 7.

When the God-child comes He will set up a government – a rule – a kingdom that will have no end.

His rule will be one of peace, justice and righteousness.

When I looked at Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 9:6-7 – they all said – this can't be Jesus. He came – but there is still sin and oppression and war – He did not set up a government.

What we need to understand is that Jesus fulfils these in coming twice.

Jesus began the kingdom has not finished setting this kingdom up – yet.

He is waiting for every single one of His people to enter His kingdom before this time of eternal joy.

But this kingdom of righteous rule, this time where justice and peace reign – it will come as certainly as Jesus came 2000 years ago to fulfil this prophecy.

Christmas is not the end – it is a down payment on eternity.

And the carol writers know this.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things far and nigh.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love.

He will order everything – He will crush Satan, sin and death.

He will rule the new world with truth and grace.

And all will glory in His righteousness and love.

The final stage of the kingdom is coming – nothing is more certain.

The only question that remains is this – have you accepted the invitation of the King?

You cannot earn your way into His kingdom – you can only come by faith – faith that the child born long ago – is God Himself come to save His people.

This is our gospel – our good news – the reason we have hope.

This is what we proclaim.

If there are any here this morning who don't have this hope – I would love to talk with you about it. To tell you of Jesus – the One sent to save His people.

So, how do you sum up such incredible truths?

How do you sum up Christmas?

Here is my attempt.

No one deserves grace – but God sends it anyway.

Read Isaiah chapters 1-8. And read Isaiah 5 a couple of times.

Their failures and their sin are epic – legendary.

You have to think Isaiah 8 would be the end.

But God did not give up on them – and He will not give up on us.

Please don't mistake what this means.

I still have times of darkness, gloom and sin.

Sometimes I still feel the yoke of my sin.

I look around this world and it seems far from peace.

The faithful Jews of Isaiah's day may have trusted in the God-child to come – but they still saw sin and darkness thrive. Their nation was oppressed and finally enslaved by Babylon.

Even when Jesus came – while He freed His people from the penalty of sin – freedom from the presence of sin will only happen when He comes again.

But that promise is so certain – Isaiah can speak of it as having already occurred.

The hope of Christmas is that Jesus has come and every promise Isaiah made will be fulfilled.

I don't know where each of you are at this Christmas.

For some this is an awesome time of year – family, food and fun.

For some Christmas is hard, lonely, a reminder that your life hasn't gone the way you want.

For others, it is downright dark and oppressive.

But here is the one constant. Every Christmas is a reminder that God has drawn near – bringing Light, Joy, Freedom and Peace – to any who choose to accept the gift of His Son.

The God-child who comes to save His people.

You cannot earn it – you certainly don't deserve it – so that is why the essence of Christmas is grace – an unearned gift.

Recently Dena and I visited the States and we caught up with a couple who are very dear long-time friends.

While we were there – something incredible happened.

The wife told us about her dad. We have known her dad a long time.

He was the most grizzled, hardened atheist you could find. A very successful businessman who despised anyone who was weak enough to believe in God.

He was quite upset when his only daughter became a Christian.

She prayed for him for over forty years. He steadfastly refused to listen to the gospel.

But now death is approaching and for the first time his heart cracked – and he asked her – tell me about Jesus.

He wanted to know – is it too late for me to accept Jesus? She was able to say – no dad – it is never too late.

Some might think – how unfair! He lived a selfish, worldly life – and then when death comes – he wants to repent.

Yeah – it is unfair – completely unfair ... but that is the gospel.

Judah didn't deserve grace. I don't deserve grace. You don't deserve grace – but God sends it anyway – in the form of a child – the Word become flesh – born to save His people.

This week RC Sproul – a very godly preacher died. Everyone has their favourite RC quotes. Here are two of mine.

There is no greater state than to get up from your knees knowing that God has forgiven every sin you've ever committed.

To know that God knows everything about me and yet loves me is indeed my ultimate consolation.

As death approached – he knew that God knew his failings, his sins, his weakness – but in Christ, God loved him anyway.

That is a man who understands the gospel.

That is a man who understands Christmas.

May we understand the essence of Christmas.

What child is this? The child who brings Light, Joy, Freedom and Peace to an undeserving people:

No one deserves grace – but God sends it anyway.