

# Isaiah 9:2-7

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Date: 09 December 2014

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[ 0 : 00 ] Just before Christmas three years ago, I had a completely un-Christmassy experience.! I was walking home from my office, which was in the middle of Richmond. I walked out to the A316, which is the big dual carriageway, which, if you go down far enough, turns into the M3.

I just crossed over at St Margaret's with the traffic lights. About five, maybe ten seconds after I crossed over the road, all the lights went out. All the street lights, all the traffic lights, and the person who walked in light was plunged into darkness, which is, of course, the opposite of what Christmas is.

Now, at that point, I have to say, my first thought was, I'm really glad I got across the road before the lights failed, because if there had been no lights, I would have had no hope of getting across. And sure enough, as soon as the traffic lights went out, I could hear the horns sounding, I turned around and saw some cars, depending on the personality of the driver, approaching the roundabout at high speed, kind of forcing their ways on, others approaching very gingerly.

And it was just carnage and chaos. Horns beeping, no doubt. Angry voices in the cars. You see, without light, there's chaos and confusion.

Without light, we cannot see reality. We cannot see what is really there. Without light, there is no hope. I would have had no hope of crossing that road if the lights had not still been on while I came to that point.

[ 1 : 22 ] So we need light, don't we? And that's what Christmas is about. That's what this great promise that God made through the prophet Isaiah over 700 years earlier was about.

Verse 2, The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Light that reveals reality. Light that gives hope in the midst of darkness and confusion.

Light that provides peace and security instead of cars driving into each other and honking at each other and getting angry. We often use light as a very powerful metaphor, don't we, for hope.

When Nelson Mandela died just over a year ago, David Cameron's comment was, A great light has gone out in this world. Why? Because to many people, Mandela's life was an example of hope, a beacon of hope.

Well, in Isaiah's day, the people needed hope. They needed light. And if we understand the context into which this promise was given, then we'll start to understand its relevance for Christmas, its relevance for us today.

[ 2 : 27 ] So the situation was this, and if you were here last week, you'll know some of this. It was about 732 AD. Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, was full of fear, full of anxiety.

After years of stability and economic progress, a new king had come to the throne, King Ahaz. And he faced a serious threat. The Syrian army in the north and the Israelite army to the north had ganged up on him, were encamped around Jerusalem.

And he was looking for any hope, any sense of security in the midst of that darkness. There was uncertainty about the future. It was fear. The situation seemed bleak and dark.

And in the bleakness and the darkness, where did people look? Well, if you look up to the top of the page, the very first line on 6-9-2, the end of verse 19, some were inquiring of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter.

People were going to superstition and to the occult and to any kind of thing they could get to try and get some sort of hope. Meanwhile, the experts had their opinion as well. So if you turn back over the page, under the title where it says, Fear God, wait for the Lord, verse 12, some people were talking about conspiracy.

[ 3 : 38 ] The Lord says to Isaiah, do not call conspiracy all that these people call conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear or be in dread. It's a sort of picture of the experts of the day sitting there going,

oh, it's all a conspiracy theory.

What do we have today as we look in our newspapers and look on the websites? There are lots of conspiracy theories out there, aren't there? Maybe no one ever went to the moon, but there are always conspiracies about what's going on in the Middle East.

So many people resorting to horoscopes to find some hope for the future. Superstition, conspiracy, it's all still rife in our days. People look for light in the midst of darkness, isn't it?

Do you know what the real darkness was in Isaiah's day? The real darkness was that people were turning to the occult, turning to human schemes like Ahaz, who had ignored God's promises and trusted that he could form a political alliance that would get him through the oncoming conflict.

People had turned away from God and they turned away from light and ended up in darkness. Their refusal to trust God's promises instead relying on their own efforts is what the real darkness was.

[ 4 : 53 ] It wasn't just the darkness of invasion. It was the darkness of turning away from God and trusting in themselves. That's not so very different from today, is it?

People long for hope and peace in the world, don't they? In the world out there, we look for peace and security in our own lives, and yet so often we rely on human things and not on God's promises.

That's really the key issue here. What will you trust? Do you trust in God and what he's doing? Or in human plans and human wisdom and human endeavour? This year is a very poignant year, isn't it? 2014. It's a hundred years since the end of World War I. And I'm sure you know what they used to call World War I. It was the war to end all wars. It hasn't quite worked out like that, has it?

But why do people think that would be the war that would end all wars? Because at the turn of that century, to the 19th and to the 20th century, in a time of great optimism, there's been so much progress in human understanding and advancement over the previous century.

[ 5 : 56 ] So much that was new. That people believed that actually human beings would solve all the world's problems. We could live at peace with one another. Human rationality, human advancement would lead to all the progress we needed.

So the world was deeply influenced by the so-called enlightenment of the 18th century, which put great faith in human reasons. Yet what happened in World War I?

The great advanced powers of the day entered into a futile battle where it got no one nowhere and destroyed millions. It showed that no matter how advanced or clever we thought we were, we could not provide peace for ourselves.

Human institutions and philosophies could not provide peace. Well, fast forward from 1914 towards the end of the 20th century, 1989, 1990, as the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, Francis Fukuyama, political scientist in America, declared it was the end of history as communism tumbled. Why did he say that? Because really, over the previous 200 years, there have been two human philosophies that sought to bring prosperity and peace to the world. There was capitalism on one hand and communism on the other.

[ 7 : 12 ] So as communism fell, Fukuyama, a learned American political scientist, declared this is the end of history. Capitalism has won. From now on, there will be peace.

Well, has it worked out like that in the last 25 years? Of course not. Neither communism! Neither communism nor capitalism has brought peace on the earth. These are human philosophies, human ideas.

They cannot solve the deep problems in the human heart. Even over the last few years, I was fascinated to read about two or three years ago in the midst of the Eurozone crisis when politicians across the Eurozone were scrabbling to find a solution to all the debt problems and Greece particularly.

What would happen would the Eurozone fall apart? British political scientist John Gray wrote this. European institutions have preserved the peace for more than a generation. That's true.

It's been a long time since the end of World War II. These institutions have provided a steady growth and prosperity. And so now the very idea that they could break up challenges the prevailing belief in steady improvement which is get this the faith of practical men and women who imagine they have no religion.

[ 8 : 29 ] The faith of practical men and women who imagine they have no religion but actually look to human institutions and human philosophies for peace and security and growth in this world.

That doesn't just happen out there on the global scene does it? It happens in here in our own hearts and lives. We want hope. We want life. We long for hope and security in the midst of personal

darkness be that insecurity in our work situations problems in our families.

And every human being longs for some hope. We cannot live without hope do we? So some of us place that hope in achievement if I work hard and if I get the next promotion then I'll be happy then I'll be secure.

Yet the promotion comes and just extra insecurities are added. We think our children if they're safe if they're secure if I get them safely out of the house off to university as reasonably responsible people I'll be happy and secure then.

And yet even that doesn't happen does it? Because then just bigger worries take hold. And of course people look for inner peace in all sorts of places. A great trend over the last five years has been mindfulness.

[ 9 : 42 ] I don't know if you've seen the stuff on mindfulness that you need to kind of cut out the world's distractions and just focus on things and that will bring you peace. Of course there is some truth that if you block out the rest of the world you can find some sort of short-lived peace.

But these are all human ideas human achievements human aspirations and none of them brings lasting light. Because all of us all of them at the end of the day are turning away from a God who loves us and is in control of everything instead seeking a solution seeking peace seeking life in our own efforts to build up our security.

We are people who walk in darkness we need a great light. So what is this light that God promises to rise to? Let's have a look at it I want you to see first of all the change that comes about as this light dawns verses 2 and 3 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.

Do you notice this is not a light that the people light up for themselves it's not a light people have generated for themselves it's a light that suddenly shines on them a bit like the street lights when they came back on just shone so we could see what does this light lead to?

Verse 3 what does it mean? You've multiplied the nation you've increased its joy they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest as they're glad when they divide the spoil it's a picture of partying it's a picture of happiness suddenly the nation that looks like it was decreasing and going to be destroyed is growing again it's like the happiness that people in the city feel when they get their bonuses that's the harvest there the joy when the spoil is divided and what's the reason for this?

[ 11 : 34 ] why is there now hope? well the immediate reason is in verse 4 and 5 for the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder the rod of his oppressor you have broken as on the day of Midian so at the time Isaiah was speaking about Israel being or Judah rather being ruled over by the Assyrians being forced into working for them the rod of the oppressor but now that's been lifted the oppression they would deal with has gone the army that was marching in would be destroyed look at this verse 5 for every boot of a tramping warrior in battle tumours and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for fire it's not just the weapons of war that have gone it's the very uniform the very shoes that soldiers would wear that's all being chucked out it's no longer needed peace has come as this light dawns so what's causing the end of oppression what's causing the end of all conflict is it a mighty army what's doing what world war one didn't do what's going to do what the

UN has never managed to do and bring peace and the end of oppression well look at verse 6 the ultimate reason for this for to us a child is born to us a son is given the solution to a world without peace solution to insecurity solution to the darkness of not being able to see reality is a child coming into the world a child being given to us coming from outside and look at who this child is it's an amazing series of titles isn't it verse 5 as it goes on the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called wonderful counsellor mighty God everlasting father prince of peace here he is this child he born is going to grow up as literally a wonder of a counsellor a wonder of a counsellor someone who's got divine wisdom to lead human wisdom fails doesn't it

I'm so glad I'm not a prime minister or a president I can't understand all the things that are going on in the world who can that this child he born would have divine wisdom a wonder of a counsellor not only that he is mighty God born as a baby yet fully God as well as fully human I don't know if you've ever had Jehovah's witnesses come and tell you that Jesus was not really God it's a great verse to confuse them with right here in the Old Testament God promises that the eternal son of God will be born as a child as a gift to his people as a true king to rule over them and bring the liberty and peace they needed so he's a wonder of a counsellor he's a mighty God he's the everlasting father a father should care for and provide for his children the father of a nation cares for and provides for a

nation doesn't he Nelson Mandela again when he died many South Africans had called him the father of the nation in a sense as though he was it was under his rule that white only rule was ended in South Africa but here is an everlasting father he will not die he will not like some human fathers lose interest and walk away he is a father to his people who will always care always provide always be there and what else is he prince of peace in other words he's the prince the ruler whose reign is characterized by peace whose reign is characterized by peace so what are the prospects when this child grows up and rules what are the prospects what's going to happen well let's look at verse 7 of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end isn't that what we'd all love isn't that what people hoped the end of world war one would bring but it didn't or the end of communism would bring but it didn't peace now what do you think of when you hear that word peace

I guess many of us probably think of the absence of conflict don't we but in the original language this is a much bigger word than that it's not just the absence of conflict it's the presence of wholeness shalom in the original it's every hunger satisfied every relationship mended every joy made complete the world restored to the wholeness that we all long for and believe we should have so how does Jesus' birth bring that light to people walking in darkness how does it bring light to people like us well of course to understand that we really need to look at the whole of Jesus' life and we don't have time to do that in five minutes now but let me just say this a little bit like the street lights or light generally helps us to see what is really there so Jesus in his life and teaching reveals reality to us he shows us what we are really like and what God is really like and just as the lights provided security for me crossing the road not after your fear of being run over by the traffic so this this baby as he grows up

[16:51] Jesus the king will provide security through his reign see that in the rest of verse 7 on the throne of David David the great king over Israel to whom God had promised a throne forever 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 forever more see he will he will rule forever and so he will bring justice and righteousness we see the disaster that happens in the world when there is no just rule we see that in Syria we heard the news yesterday about trial falling apart in South Africa and the heartache obviously I don't know the rights and wrongs went on there but the heartache of the family of the murdered woman that they feel they haven't got justice they'll never understand what happened to their daughter it's a terrible thing isn't it and yet here is the one who will rule and bring absolute justice and righteousness and that means he will judge justly he will destroy all who oppose his reign all who bring grief and strife on this world so he reveals reality he provides security he brings hope of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end and as you read on through the story of Jesus life you'll see that hope that he died but then rose again and his resurrection the fact that he's alive is confirmation that he really is the king that he really is the one reigning yes he has not yet destroyed all evil he has not yet brought in his perfect eternal kingdom in its fullness the peace and security we all long for but the day will come his resurrection proves that one of the reasons

I'm a Christian is I'm convinced that Jesus Christ really rose from the dead so how can this child do all this how can he reveal reality provide security and bring hope well he does it ultimately through the culmination of his life on earth when he died on the cross to pay for all the wickedness all the unrighteousness all the injustice so that all who trust in him can be forgiven all who will turn and bow down to him as the rightful king can be forgiven so that's how he provides everlasting security for those who accept that offer of forgiveness who accept the offer that Jesus death can pay for our punishment we can have everlasting security as part of his kingdom so really there are two ways to live just as the people of Isaiah's day found we can either trust in God's promises trust what God does including sending his son to be the king who will bring peace for those who submit to him or we can look to human solutions human ways to find our own hope see Jesus is the one this baby born at

Christmas the child given to us is the one who brings real hope he is the light who comes into the world who reveals the reality about God and his love about us human beings and our desperate need our desperate rebellion in our hearts that causes the troubles in the world he is the one who provides a way for us to be right with God again to have hope to have life and light so really quite two questions for us as we close firstly how do we respond to this gift of a child at Christmas time you know what it's like at Christmas don't you perhaps remember this from being a kid we got gifts

under a Christmas tree and I'm sure as children none of us left the gifts there did we in fact the trouble was trying to get them before Christmas morning if we're honest we'd always take them and open them up and see what they were well here's a gift that would be foolish to leave behind wouldn't we so what will we do with this child that's been given to us will we just leave him there unopened be rude to do that wouldn't it let me ask another question where do you really look for light in your life where do you look for hope and security where do our friends look for light and hope in the midst of darkness human philosophies man made ideas they fail they leave us stumbling around as I was stumbling around when those lights went out we need the light that God gives the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light let's pray you