

Isaiah 9:2-7

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you know this, but people who start the day with the news are 27% less happy in the afternoon.

It sounds like one of those made-up statistics, doesn't it? How do they prove that? That is actually from a psychiatrist, Dr. Daniel Amen.

People who start the day with the news are 27% less happy in the afternoon. However made-up it might sound, when we stop to think about it, actually, when we consider the content of our news, the surprise is actually that number isn't a whole lot higher.

Just the last few days, what have we had? War, hostages, knife crime, climate alarmism, cost of living crisis, government corruption, murder, and so on.

Global to local, across the world, across the street, our world is a dark. It's a dark place. So who can blame those who don't bother with the news?

[1 : 15] But the truth, if we think about it, is that avoiding the darkness isn't as simple just as deleting your news app. Wherever we go, it seems to follow us.

So we look for other ways to escape, not just deleting the news app on our phone, but other ways. Many ways, we could say that life is defined by our...

We eat and we drink.

And for a moment, darkness seems to lift a little bit. Or we gain. We bring ourselves into another world where we can take on a persona and behave in a different way.

That can mask the pain for a bit. Maybe hide from the darkness a bit. And then others take the opposite approach via the world of wellness.

[2 : 14] It feels like it's completely the other way around. It's much better for us physically. For us physically and emotionally.

But actually, focusing on our diet, focusing on exercise, focusing on mindfulness and breath work, that can be just as much as an escape from the darkness of this world as drinking the pain away. It's a way of trying to make my life better in order that the darkness is kept at arm's length a little bit longer. The third option that lots of us engage in is that we obsess about order in our personal lives and in our families.

The world out there might be dark and falling apart. But in here, everything's in order. So we can drink it away, we can control it, and we can order our lives in a way that keeps darkness at bay.

Lots of us pursue that. But none of these fix the problem, do they, in any substantial or lasting way. And yet, we're looking towards Christmas. The trees are going up.

[3 : 23] The lights are on around us. And this season, it seems, encourages us to ramp up that escapism. Our culture, it seems, gives us permission to eat and to drink and to indulge at this time of year.

We're allowed to spend time and money making our homes look just perfect. And, of course, we're allowed just to spend and spend and spend. It's expected of us that we spend on stuff.

Because we're told that stuff will fix the problems. If we have the right stuff, we'll be able to keep the darkness at bay. The reality is that most of us have seen a few Christmases now.

And we realize that however nice a time we have with our family and our friends and our carol services. However much goodwill we enjoy in this season with one another, we haven't escaped.

We haven't escaped. The darkness remains. And January rolls around and often the darkness is even deeper. So what is the answer? Should we just not bother?

[4 : 28] Should we delete Christmas like we delete the news app? And just suck it up that this world is a dark and frightening place? Is that what we should do? Happily, no.

In fact, Christians recognize that the lights and the celebrations at this time of year are entirely appropriate. Because during this season that we know as Advent, we remember and we look to the coming of Jesus Christ.

The light of the world. Advent relates to both his birth and his coming into the world in the future. His birth, that very first Christmas. And his coming again on the last day.

Advent is supposed to help us to look both ways, as it were. To look back to Christ's coming in celebration. While at the same time looking forward to his coming again in anticipation of when he returns for his people.

And the text that we are planning to study, Lord willing, over the month of December will help us do that. They will help shine light into our darkness. And I hope we'll see.

[5 : 32] Most importantly, I hope we'll see that it is a light that doesn't get packed up in January. It doesn't get put up in the loft at the end of the season. And it doesn't just make the harshness of life a little bit easier to bear for a week or two at this time of year.

I hope we'll see that it is a light that defeats darkness once and for all. It is a light that transforms the lives of those who come under its glow. That's the promise we have before us this morning in this well-known passage in Isaiah 9.

Verse 2, can you see? The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Light into darkness. Darkness. Like us, the people in 8th century BC in Isaiah's day knew what cultural and personal darkness felt like.

Darkness in the Bible refers both to evil and ignorance. That is, rejecting God's ways, evil, and thinking that they can sort out the problems themselves without him.

Ignorance. Rejection of God and self-reliance. Symbolized by darkness. And what happens? Once these people, they faced threats on their borders from stronger nations as Syria was threatening.

[6 : 45] And they looked anywhere other than God for help. A society crumbled around them. If you have a look back up, verses 19 and 20 in chapter 8. Society is crumbling.

They're experiencing the darkness. What do they do? They inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter. They don't bother with God.

Instead, they go to the magicians and the mediums. They try to contact their dead relatives. Witchcraft. That's where they turn. But look where it leads. Look how the chapter ends. Verse 21. They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. 22. They'll look at the earth. But behold, distress and darkness.

The people are looking to the earth. They're looking to human ideas and resources to fix the world, to fix their situation. They know that they're in darkness.

[7 : 42] Nobody is in any disagreement that there is a problem with our world. But their answer is to try and overcome it themselves. Sounds very familiar, doesn't it? Everyone acknowledges we have problems in our world today.

But where do we turn for answers? The state. Some people turn to the state. The market. Others look there. Increasingly, where are we looking? Technology. Technology. If we can just keep growing in our technological advancements, then we'll be okay.

But all of these actually share the same assumption. We can find a way out of the darkness ourselves. If we have enough intellect and innovation directed in the right way, we will work our own way out of the darkness.

Let's be honest. Is it really possible? Is it really working? Our leaders and the culture makers have made plenty of promises and technology continues to advance at speed.

But is it really moving the world forward in the ways that really matter? Let's be honest. When we look around, is humanity nurtured more?

[8 : 51] Are the vulnerable safer now? Can politics and science actually fix the deepest problems in our hearts? The current COVID inquiry suggests not.

Can we save ourselves from war? Racial animosity. Social envy. Exploitation. Greed. Apparently not. Apparently not. The brightest and the best are doing their thing.

Technology is going in its direction at a pace. Are we any better off? Really? The current solutions that we are offered aren't working.

Our own attempts at making lasting change. In fact, what happens? They only make the darkness deeper. It's the same that Isaiah saw in chapter 8. It's what Isaiah says will always happen.

The more we look to ourselves, the more we look to human solutions, the more the problems will just increase. But, but God has promised an answer.

[9 : 59] In Isaiah 9, we see what our intellect and innovation cannot achieve. God promises to accomplish. Point number one, God will send light. God will send light.

Verse 1, but there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. 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 shined.

But, things are dark. Things are very, very, very dark. But, God is stepping in. It's not that the people walking in darkness have found a great light or have made a great light for themselves. But, a light from the outside has shone. God shining into darkness. But, what will the light bring?

Verse 3, you have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.

They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For, as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

[11 : 06] Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. The light will bring joy as captives are set free, as conflicts cease, as enemies are defeated.

That, I'm sure you'll agree, is a very significant promise. Not to mention the promise in verse 7. Can you see, of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end.

Joy and peace. That's the announcement. That's what the light will bring. But, you think, don't you? Here we are all these years later and we still have this awful news feed.

Here we are all these years later and we still have suffering and sickness and pain. Surely, the only joy really that we have at Christmas is the pretense that we put on.

It's the fleeting joy that we can create. The fleeting joy of a nice day with the family. The only peace we can hope for, surely, is going to be brief and limited because of the mess of my life and the mess of our circumstances in this culture.

[12 : 18] It sounds to me that what you're saying is just close your eyes and hope for the best in the face of the harsh reality. It doesn't sound true. But let's look at what Isaiah says here.

In verses 6 and 7, he's looking forward. Do you see that? His name shall be called. Future. But in 2 to 5, he uses the past tense.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And he does this because of the certainty that he has that these things will happen.

It's coming in the future, but there is certainty because the prophet, looking down the telescope of time, describes events as if they've already happened because he speaks for the one who knows the end from the beginning.

So Israel, we're under the shadow of invasion from Assyria. And the promise, verse 3, is that beyond that, beyond the judgment that's going to come through Assyria, God has enlarged the nation, bringing the sort of joy there is when the harvest is a bumper one, or the sort of joy when battle is won and the enemy is plundered.

[13 : 28] God is promising a restoration when the enemy invasion will cease and the oppression of Assyria will be no more. He's looking beyond the present, beyond what is about to come.

God will do just as he did, he promises, in Judges 6 to 8 when Gideon defeated the might of Midian with a tiny band of men. God will do exactly what he did then.

And the point of that victory was to show that it was God who did it. He did it with only a small group of people so that people would know that it was his victory. He'll do the same again. The very unimpressive will be victorious because it's God who's at work.

Salvation in the Old Testament uses the imagery of war because God's people were a political entity and war was a means of God's judgment. So an end to war represented an end to God's judgment, his punishment.

But because the people's problem was fundamentally spiritual and moral, remember that's why we have the imagery of darkness. Rejecting God, trying to live on our own terms.

[14 : 33] The fundamental problem there is spiritual and moral. It is to do with our relationship with God. That's the imagery of darkness. Because that's the reality, it is no less relevant to us this morning.

We know, don't we, that we live. We were reminded of it, the announcement about Stuart, a moment ago.

We live facing the inevitability of death. Inevitability. Lots of us want to resist this fact, but it is unavoidable.

You might know about Brian Johnson, the Californian tech billionaire. He's 45 going on 18. That's how he describes himself. Physically, he has spent \$2 million a year on medical treatments, a strict diet and exercise program to reverse the aging process.

He's spending all this money. He's being measured all the time. He has the physical capabilities, it seems, of an 18-year-old, despite the fact he's 45. So he claims to be succeeding.

[15 : 41] Good for Brian. We know, don't we, he's not going to win in the end. He might be able to live for a very long time, but he can't beat death, can he?

Why can he not beat death? Because death is first and foremost a moral reality before it is a physical one. Death, we know, death is the consequence of sin. Death exists because of our rebellion against God.

And because of that, however much green paste we eat, how many things we strap ourselves up to and whatever we do, we're all going to die.

But the announcement in Isaiah 9 tells us that one day the terrible enemy of the human race will be no more.

The light has dawned on us. And we're liberated from the oppression of sin's slavery. That's the reason for the joy.

[16 : 49] And that's the reason why we can have joy at Christmas and every other day of the year. And it's a joy that transcends our circumstances. Not only that, look at verse 5.

The light will also bring an end to all wars and suffering and oppression and injustice. The light will bring peace. And not just, again, military peace, whether in Isaiah's day or in some future day, but peace in the cosmic conflict between us and God.

If our biggest problem is our rebellion against God, the sin that cuts us off from Him and leads to the inevitability of death, well, what we need is peace in the conflict between us and Him.

All human conflict and hostility in the world, from an argument that you have as someone else, a crossword that you have as someone else, to whatever wars are going on globally, all of it is fundamentally a microcosm of the hostility that exists in our hearts towards God.

Each one of us needs to find peace with God. All of us, whoever you are, whatever your experience of life, wherever you've come from this morning, you need peace with God.

[18 : 05] And the reason is because we've done that thing which at Christmas is the most offensive thing you can do. You know that when someone has given a gift and the person doesn't say thank you, that's the heart of the human condition.

We've snatched God's gifts and we've not said thank you. We've enjoyed God's gifts without any reference to the giver. We talk about things like hostility with God.

You can say, oh, that sounds a bit, that sounds a bit much. But actually, that's exactly what we do. We take all of His good things and we say, no, thank you. I don't want anything to do with you.

That ingratitude is offensive to anyone. Never mind the Lord of the cosmos. Never mind the one who gives us every breath. So, of course, there's hostility.

But the announcement in Isaiah 9 is that in the dawning of this light, God has taken the initiative to deal with the problem and to offer us peace with Him.

[19 : 11] The question is, such a beautiful promise, such a wonderful thing. How will this promised light come to be? Here's the second point. God's light comes through a baby.

God's light comes through a baby. Verse 6. For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given.

And the government shall be upon his shoulder. And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 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. Sounds strange, doesn't it? We have a global problem of moral and spiritual darkness and the solution is a child.

We have a global problem of moral and spiritual darkness. We have got some little children in the congregation, little babies. Llywelyn's probably the newest one.

[20 : 18] After the service, when we're out here having coffee, find Llywelyn and just marvel at the strength. Marvel at the wisdom. Marvel at the competence.

The ability to work everything out in this little one. what must this have sounded like Isaiah stands up to speak for God and he says listen to me the cultural mess that we are in the darkness of your struggles and all the issues on the news don't worry a woman is going to have a baby surely God will bring a mighty army surely he will provide some unmissable show of strength no a child but what a child he is human he is born as a baby but he is also divine look at the names verse 6 wonderful counselor mighty God everlasting father prince of peace these are all kingly titles his reign he reigns on David's throne verse 7 he does that because he is wonderful literally kingly counselor with all the supernatural wisdom of God remember Jesus in the gospels knowing what people were thinking before they even speak teaching with unheard of authority speaking about the future before it comes to pass wonderful counselor mighty God again in the gospels we see Jesus revealing his divine identity as he exercises power and authority over everything with a word he calms a storm with a word he even raises the dead mighty God everlasting father if you were here last week we heard Jesus say if you have seen me you have seen the father here is the one who cares for us like a loving parent when you look at the ministry of Jesus he's feeding the hungry he's helping the weak he's tender with the broken and needy and this care is everlasting he is the everlasting fatherly care prince of peace prince of peace

Jesus does not conquer by military force but instead through vulnerable suffering and death Jesus life and teaching were amazing but they were not able on their own to resolve the vertical hostility between man and God that took the death of the prince of peace on the cross he bore the punishment that we deserve for our sin in order that we could be reconciled in order that peace would exist between us and our father in heaven all this means that when we are in Christ when you put your faith in the Lord Jesus you are united to Christ and when you are in Christ the great enemy of mankind death that inevitable shadow that is cast across our lives and across our world that death has lost its sting in Christ death is like a gun with the bullets taken out when it's held up to your face it's frightening but it can't kill you not in any ultimate sense it can scare you but it cannot condemn you physical death for the Christian is just a hurdle on the way to eternal life it's just a speed bump to the new heavens and the new earth the home of righteousness what this means is that in our dark world marked with all of the pain and sadness that we see there is always always real hope because of Christmas in the person of Jesus

God broke into the darkness bringing light and blessing in verse 7 zeal the Lord of hosts will do all of this all of God does all that God does so every ounce of divine energy is invested in this so the question of the ages then and it's a question that comes into focus at this time of year is this what do you make of this Jesus that's the question that all of us need to have an answer for what do you make of the one born in the manger he is the light of the world he is the light of the world who achieves all that is required to give us real hope in this life he began his ministry in Galilee Matthew chapter 4 verse 13 and following tells us that and it is this same Galilee of the Gentiles that felt the full force of the Syrian invasion in Isaiah 9 verse 1

Jesus arrives on the scene taking the words of this prophecy on his lips you remember leaving Nazareth Jesus went and lived in Capernaum by the sea 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 the shadow of death on them a light has dawned but then he adds something of his own Matthew chapter 4 verse 17 follows that by saying this repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand the reason to celebrate at Christmas is because through his son God has brought light into our darkness and he freely gives real joy and lasting peace salvation from sin and death and he does that to anyone who is prepared to do that to repent repentance is how we receive these gifts from God repentance is the right response to all that

[26 : 28] God has done for us the fact that his son broke into history and all the humility of a flesh and blood baby and then laid down his life to secure those blessings means that we can trust him so I want to encourage you this morning to submit to this Lord Jesus because when you submit to him you can face the world with whatever fears it may bring with confidence and even even with joy because C.S. Lewis said Jesus is a light for us when all other lights go out let's pray together together together together together!

together together together