

Mistletoe and Wine - what's so special about Christmas?

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- [0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 8, and we're reading from verse 11 right through to chapter 9, verse 7. This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people.
- Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear, and do not tread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy.
- He is the one you are to fear, and he is the one you are to dread. He will be a holy place for both Israel and Judah.
- He will be a stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem, he will be a trap and a snare.
- Many of them will stumble. They will fall and be broken. They will be snared and captured. Bind up this testimony of warning and seal up God's instruction among my disciples.
- [1 : 20] I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him. Here am I, and the children of the Lord has given me.
- We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion. 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? Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.
- Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land. When they are famished, they will become enraged. And looking upwards, will curse their king and their God.
- Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness. And fearful gloom. And they will be thrust into utter darkness.
- [2 : 42] Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who are in distress. In the past, he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Nath-Tali.
- But in the future, he will honor Galilee of the nations by the way of the sea beyond the Jordan. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.
- On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.
- They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest. As warriors 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 oppressors. Every warrior's boot is used in battle. And every garment rolled in blood.
- [3 : 48] Will be destined for burning. Will be fuel for the fire. 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. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

This is the holy word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, St. Silas. Thanks, Alan, very much for reading.

[4 : 52] And if you keep the Bibles open at Isaiah chapters 8 and 9, that would be a great help to me. Page 694 in the church Bibles there. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the senior minister here.

And it's great to have you with us as we continue in this series in Isaiah. You can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful. As we turn to this passage together.

But let's pray and ask for God's help as we hear his voice. Let's pray together. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we ask for your mercy.

That you would give us ears to hear. Eyes to see you. And hearts that are willing to change and follow you. For we ask in the name of your Son, the Lord Jesus.

Amen. Amen. Well, we're in this series in Isaiah. And the key question it asks of each of us is, where is your faith? We all trust in something.

[5 : 49] And Isaiah asks us, are you going to trust the Lord? Or are you trusting someone else or something else? And when we hit a crisis in our lives, that's really when the stabilizers come off.

And we really have to learn to trust the Lord. We get challenged. Can I really trust God in this difficulty? Can I cling to his promises and really wait for him?

Trust that he's got a plan. Even if that's different to my plan and my hope. I've got a friend who talks about a climbing accident that he had.

He's a keen mountain climber. He was climbing up a rock face with a friend. And one of the ropes fell. And they were left hanging. His friends hanging underneath him.

And he was hanging from this cliffside by one rope. And they had nothing they could do except just wait for somebody to notice them hanging off the cliffside. And get a helicopter rescue to come and get them.

[6 : 47] Which eventually happened. He'd been a Christian for years and years when this happened to him. But in the moment of crisis, he says that suddenly he realized that his natural instinct wasn't to pray about what was going on.

He found it deeply unnatural. He had to make himself pray. Because everything about himself in that situation said, What can I do to solve this problem?

And even when he then realized he couldn't solve the problem, rather than pray, he just panicked. He just wanted to panic. Instead of thinking, no, I can pray to God about this. He's powerful.

And that, you know, he was climbing. But that can happen to a Christian at any time. I remember being in a situation here a couple of years ago. We had a very difficult challenge at St. Silas that I was aware of.

I was trying to solve the problem myself. And I was talking it through with an older Christian to get his advice on what I needed to do about it. And he said to me, well, we must pray.

- [7 : 49] And it was a big challenge to me. I hadn't been praying enough about the problem. I've been thinking, I need to solve this. And it took me by surprise that this guy evidently thought praying would be the right thing to do. And we did pray.
- And of course it was the right thing. But what a challenge to me in that situation. God's saying to me, will you depend on me? Will you wait for me in what's going on? Faith in a crisis.
- Now, Isaiah's first hearers, they're God's people living around Jerusalem in about 700 BC. And the crisis was a military threat. And their king, King Ahaz, is meant to be the leader of God's people.
- But in this crisis of the military threat, instead of trusting God, he opened the temple in Jerusalem, got the gold and silver out, and he gave it to the emperor of Assyria.
- To say to the king of Assyria, I'm trusting you to help me in this crisis. Will you protect Judah from this looming military threat? And Isaiah challenged him to trust God.
- [8 : 49] And he completely failed. A spectacular failure. So the message from Isaiah last week was that judgment is coming on the people because the king and the people have failed to trust God.
- The Assyrian Empire is Ahaz's new God. And ironically, the Assyrian Empire is going to come and ransack Judah.
- It happened historically in 701 BC. Everything Isaiah predicts here in chapters 7 and 8 happened to Judah in 701 BC. But our passage this morning brings the attention back from Ahaz and the people as a whole and onto Isaiah and his followers.
- What do you do when the crowd around you has all rejected God? How do you respond to that? What should Isaiah and his followers do? And their model response for us comes in verse 17 of chapter 8.
- If you just look down at verse 17, he says, I will wait for the Lord who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.
- [9 : 55] Waiting and trusting. So as we hear that response, God invites us and he moves us really with the promises here to choose that response for ourselves, for our lives.
- Whatever the crowd's doing, I'm going to wait for the Lord. I'm going to trust him. So we're going to see the way of the people and then the promise of dawn. And then thirdly, the plan of the Lord.
- So our first point this morning, the way of the people and how to avoid it. So if you have a look at verse 11, Isaiah is being urged not to follow the crowd.
- This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. And then in the rest of chapter 8, he describes two things that are true of the crowd as it rejects God.
- Two things that were true then and two things that today are true of people when they turn from God. Why do we stop trusting him? First of all, we fear everything instead of God's power.
- [11 : 03] So in verse 12, Isaiah is told, Do not fear what they fear and do not dread it. And the alternative in verse 13, The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy.
- He is the one you are to fear. He is the one you are to dread. And if we don't fear him, then at the end of verse 14, it says that that holy God becomes a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.
- And Peter took that language in the New Testament, in 1 Peter, to describe Jesus. That for anyone who turns to Jesus and trusts him, he's a cornerstone that we build our lives on and that God is building his people on.

But when you reject Jesus, he becomes a stumbling stone that causes you to stumble over. Ahaz and his people, they're fearing this military threat and they won't fear God instead and think, well, let's fear him and his holiness and do what he's asked us to do.

And we see all around us, don't we, people who've forgotten God. That's the culture we live in. And what do we see? We see people who are afraid in the build-up to the election, in the news.

[12 : 13] People talk, don't they, in referendums and elections about project fear that politicians go on. What are people afraid of that we can speak about to bring them to vote in a certain way?

And usually, it's about money. That's what we're afraid of. We're afraid that Brexit might mean we have less money. I know Brexit's a very complex issue and there are lots of reasons why we might support it or be against it.

But the thing that hits the headlines are the think tanks that say we'll be this much worse off because of Brexit. It's about the economy. And people are calling the party manifestos the great giveaway election.

We're getting offered loads of free stuff if we'll vote for the right people. Or we get afraid for our health. We're afraid for other people's health, people around us.

We're afraid of climate change, aren't we? People are getting increasingly afraid about climate change. We're afraid of crime. We're afraid of death. And so we're so afraid of death, we don't talk about it and we persuade ourselves it won't happen to us.

[13 : 22] You know, we won't be the person who gets cancer. We won't be the person who gets sick, who gets older, who gets vulnerable. We're afraid of failure. Maybe in our workplace, we're afraid of what a boss could do to us if we fail.

We get afraid of being lonely, of everyone else kind of getting on in life and us being left behind. We're afraid for our children if we have them.

We're afraid about their happiness, about their well-being. We're afraid of being criticized, of being disliked, of being rejected. And lots of those things that we're afraid of are very serious things.

In God's word, we have it affirmed that lots of those things are things that are gifts from God that it's only natural to be afraid of losing. But the solution God calls us to here is to have a bigger view of God and his holiness, how set apart he is from us.

He's in a different league to us. So that above all, what we fear is being with him in his presence, in our sin, in our rebellion.

[14 : 34] We saw this vision in Isaiah 6 of what Isaiah had. The train of God's robe filled the temple. There was smoke. There was an earthquake. Terrifying warrior angels shouting, Holy, Holy, Holy.

If we see the Lord like that, we'll fear him. And if we fear him, everything else is put into perspective. If the Holy God is on our side, if our unworthiness is dealt with by him, then we don't really have anything else to fear because he is so powerful and he can sort out everything else.

But when we get a smaller view of him, when people are big and God is small and we stop fearing him, all these other things seem so much more frightening. So that's the first way of the crowd.

We fear everything instead of God's power. And then following on from that in verses 19 to 22, when we stop fearing God, we stop listening to him. So the second characteristic of the crowd is we listen to anything instead of God's word.

So let's have a look at 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?

[15 : 52] Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. So what is God's instruction and the testimony of warning? Well, those words are used exactly of Isaiah's word from God.

In verse 16, just up from there, God says to Isaiah, bind up this testimony of warning and seal up God's instruction among my disciples. So it's the scriptures that they should be listening to, God's people, because they've stopped fearing God, they've stopped listening to God and they've gone to listen to anything else that might give them some guidance.

It reminds me of G.K. Chesterton's quote where he said, when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything. And in Isaiah's time, it was superstition and we see that around us today, don't we?

We see superstition among people. In the alternative spiritualities, people will listen to and read about and cling to. One of the best-selling books in the book charts at the moment is still, it's a few years old now, The Secret by Rhonda Byrne, where she promises that there's this secret that people like Leonardo da Vinci knew and other people through history, but now she can tell you what the secret is and she promises that anyone can access the power of this hidden secret to bring themselves health, wealth and happiness.

It's a bestseller. Or we might think of Stoicism as the best-selling books that people want for Christmas. People want to learn from the Stoics about how to get through life and flourish because we're not listening to God.

[17 : 31] For you and me today, maybe we're not superstitious at all, but it might be worth us asking, who is it around me that I'm most likely to listen to instead of God? Is it psychology?

Are we trusting in what psychologists say about the human mind and self-esteem and flourishing against, even if that went against God's word? Or is it mindfulness and the power of now to get me through life?

Maybe it's just the boss or the senior colleague at work who we look at them and we think, they seem to have everything I've been working for. I'm going to listen to them. The person we respect so much, they just be, we turn them into our guru and we listen to them even if the way they've done life goes against God's word.

Well, where does that leave Ahaz and his people in Isaiah's time? Verse 21 is a fascinating combination, isn't it? Verse 21, distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land.

They're distressed because they're still afraid. They're stressed out. The things they went to try and solve their fears haven't worked and they're distressed and they're under judgment.

[18 : 46] The false gods haven't delivered. They're hungry because their desires are not being met by their false gods that they've turned to. And today, don't we see that all around us in our culture that's forgotten God?

That people are stressed out, aren't they? People are frantic. They're unable to relax. And people are hungry. They're hungry because they're dissatisfied. Always hungry for the next thing that will fill the hole.

Then they get it. Then it's the next thing. And then it makes them angry. So look at the end of verse 21. When they are famished, they will become enraged and looking upwards, so they look upwards for someone to blame, they will curse their king and their God.

So cursing their king, just as people today will curse politics, won't they? Curse the powers that be for their situation. And they curse their God, just as people today would say, well, how could God let this happen to me?

Your God can't exist or this wouldn't have happened to me. Not stopping to think, but what if God is good and this is happening to me as a wake-up call because it's showing me that everything isn't well between me and God because I've trusted other things instead of him?

[20 : 06] There's this haunting line in verse 17. As Isaiah says he'll wait for the Lord and trust the Lord, he says, the Lord who is hiding his face from the people. But people don't stop to think like that, do they?

Think, maybe what's happening to me is because God is hiding his face from me because I've stopped trusting him. So folks, that's what the crowd around Isaiah was like and he and his disciples are being urged in verse 11, don't follow the crowd.

They fear everything instead of God's power that you should fear. They listen to anything instead of God's word and it's left them distressed, distressed, dissatisfied, famished, then angry.

And in verse 22 he calls all of that, that condition, he calls it darkness. darkness. Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

It's a foretaste of the judgment that's ultimately coming from God on people who reject him but that's why we need dawn and so that's our second point, the promise of dawn and the difference it makes.

[21 : 21] So God now gives us the promises for those who will wait on him. Let's read verses, sorry, from verse 1 of chapter 9. He says, nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

And then the dawn comes to the most surprising place. Up to the north of Judah was the Sea of Galilee and the land around there was the land that was continually being ravaged as armies, empires were coming down from the north.

So we read, in the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations by the way of the sea beyond the Jordan.

It's the place you'd least expect the dawn to rise where the darkness and distress of judgment has been so dark comes the dawn. So verse 2, the people there, the people walking in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

And as God acts to save his people we see the results of that work. In verse 3 it's joy. You see that again and again in verse 3. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.

[22 : 34] They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. So we might picture a farming community that completely depends on its crops growing.

Think of friends who were missionaries in Namibia and they'd send their prayer requests month by month to prayer partners and amidst praying for their Christian ministry work again and again them saying can you pray for rain?

The rain hasn't come and people are panicking and the farmers are distressed because they long for rain. And then the picture of that rain coming and the crops growing and a bumper harvest being brought in and it means for the people literally it's life saving.

It means health for them and their families. It means security for the winter until next year. So the harvest is this time of just sheer relief and happiness and that's the picture of the joy when God brings his salvation to his people.

And then in the next picture he says it's like the victory of warriors I was thinking of in the movie Gladiator there's this early on Maximus is with a Roman army and they're lined up on the battlefield and you can see them terrified and he's geeing them up and getting them to boast and go for it and be brave.

[23 : 59] But of course on the battlefield warriors don't know if they'll make it home alive by the end of that day. They don't know if they'll see their families again and it's terrifying. And then when the victory comes and the enemy has fled and they're able just to divide up the plunder the relief the joy the celebration and that's the picture again of the joy when God saves his people.

Then he moves on to describe the freedom. He goes back to a time when Israel was under attack from Midian. Look at verse 4. He says for as in the day of Midian's defeat you that is God have shattered the yoke that burdens them the bar across their shoulders the rod of their oppressor.

God taking his people from captivity brutal slavery into glorious freedom and then they have a future of peace.

So verse 5 it's wonderful pictures isn't it? Verse 5 every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning will be fuel for the fire.

So we might think of Fallujah and it just becoming a ghost town and how there'll be no more airport security checks anymore because there's no fear of danger anymore.

[25 : 17] Just imagine what a promise like that means today if you're Kurdish or if you're living in Yemen that when God saves his people you never again are going to have to fear being attacked again.

So Isaiah is looking here from 700 BC he's looking forward to a time that is still future for us as God's people today when God's going to make good on the promises he made to Abraham back in Genesis chapter 12 to establish his kingdom where his people as a great multitude from every nation will live together in security with him forever.

So we still wait on God for the fulfillment of these promises but when we wait as we wait for them as Christians the future breaks into the present and we enjoy the blessing today of living in hope for these fulfillments.

So when we trust God today and we wait for him we're already his people we already have joy in having been given spiritual life in being rescued from slavery to sin so that we're free from the power of sin.

God has come and made his home in us by his spirit. He's adopted us so that we go through life knowing him as a good father. He's forgiven us we have peace with God.

[26 : 40] So the future is broken in from the day you put your trust in Jesus but we still live in bodies that are sinning and dying and in a world that's sinning and dying and marred by sin and death and as we read these promises we can yearn in hope for the darkness and distress to be fully and finally over for perfect joy freedom and peace.

I was thinking it was like we were on holiday in October and a couple times I went running before dawn and where we were staying there were mountains and as I was running as I was coming back from my run dawn would have broken but you couldn't yet see it wasn't yet properly light because the mountains were still hiding the sun but you could see you could see a glimmer of dawn and it's like we're living now in those times of dawn has started and there's joy in that but we still look forward and we yearn for the full daylight to come.

So how is God going to do that? Well that's our final point we've heard the way of the people that we want to avoid we've heard the promise of dawn and the difference it makes our third point the plan of the Lord and how he achieves it.

So look with me at verse 6 of chapter 9 verse 6 for to us a child is born to us a son is given.

It's amazing isn't it? God's breathtaking world changing promises coming to pass through the birth of one child the gift of one son we hear the child is a king verse 6 the government will be on his shoulders and then he's given titles and he will be called Wonderful Counselor Mighty God Everlasting Father Prince of Peace he's given eight titles there and in each pairing one of them is a divine word and one of them is a human word it goes God, man man, God God, man man, God so wonderful is a word for the supernatural for the divine Counselor is a human word for a guide a helper an advocate an encourager Mighty is a human word for a warrior a commander but he's God

[29 : 15] Mighty God Everlasting is a divine word only God is everlasting from everlasting to everlasting you alone are God Father Father is a human word for our provider guardian protector carer he's everlasting Father through him we encounter God's fatherly care dependably this is a father who will always be there who stays close Prince is a human word for a royal son don't think of the Duke of York in the news think of royalty in its goodness in its majesty capable leadership and then peace is a divine word it's the word shalom the word for the peace that our hearts were made for and long for that only God can give so in each of the four pairs this child way to put our hope in is God and man together and if verse 6 is about who he will be verse 7 is about what he will do verse 7 of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end it was to King David in 2 Samuel 7 a few hundred years before Isaiah that God promised one of his descendants would rule over

God's people forever so we read in verse 7 of this child 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 and then the assurance how can one child do all of this well end of verse 7 the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this that is that the Lord the Lord Almighty is passionate to establish his eternal kingdom and so he's promised it and he will do it and Isaiah leaves the people waiting picture them in exile in the 6th century BC in Babylon having had to leave the land or back in the land in 400 BC and 300 BC generation after generation I know there's a child coming we're yearning for this child and then we read in Matthew's gospel when Jesus had heard that John had been put in prison he withdrew to Galilee leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali the way of the sea beyond the Jordan

Galilee of the Gentiles the people living in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned from that time on Jesus began to preach repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near so if you're here today and you're just looking in just looking I wonder is God here saying to you through his mouthpiece Isaiah as he says it to me do you feel in distress do you feel hungry do you see a world around us that is stressed and distressed and hungry trust my promise and wait for me and you can share this hope of a coming dawn of indestructible joy and true freedom and eternal peace it's a future that breaks into your present it starts the day you trust in God and those promises are all centered on the son who is given the Christ child others of us here have been a Christian many years let me ask could you see the world through God's eyes this week as we see them in Isaiah chapter 8 the world so often just looks so attractive to us doesn't it and we become half-hearted towards God because we see people around us who've forgotten God and there's things about them we cover we cover the affluence and the perceived freedom we see glitter but God says it's gloomy it's gloomy out there and it's only going to get worse building your life on things other than God actually leads to distress to hunger to frustration to anger and then eventually to darkness so let me ask you to ask yourself what are you fearing instead of God what are you listening to instead of his word and how could you fill your mind with the promises here of light in the darkness these promises in Isaiah 8 and 9 they're such good fuel for the fire of our hearts so that our hearts yearn for God to keep these promises that only he can keep so that we wait for him and we demonstrate that waiting by prayerfulness turning to him in prayer seeking him day by day depending on him waiting for him

Isaiah 9 reminded me this week surely I can commit everything into the hands of a God who has a plan as good as this and as we pray to him as we obey his word let's be thankful that we hear these promises and the king has already come when we read the gospels every time Jesus does something righteous every time he does the right thing we can read the gospels thinking yes there he is at last God sent the child the promised one of Isaiah 9 has come we can trust him he's magnificent and through him we never have to be in darkness because he endured darkness on the cross when he was strung up there and from the sixth hour to the ninth hour it was dark for him in him we never have to be distressed because on the cross he was distressed and cried out my God why have you forsaken me hail the heaven born prince of peace hail the son of righteousness light and life to all he brings risen with healing in his wings let's pray together we praise you

Lord Jesus Christ for who you are wonderful counselor mighty God everlasting father prince of peace we praise you Jesus for what you have done and that the greatness of your government and peace will never end help us like Isaiah to wait for you and to trust you while we look for your coming again Amen