

We Can't Do It Alone

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[0 : 00] Great. Good evening. My name's James. I'm on the staff team here at St. Silas. And if you could keep that passage open, that would be a great joy and encouragement to me. Hopefully you were encouraged as you read that passage.

And you might be able to tell by my accent that I didn't grow up in Scotland. And so carols by candlelight is always a bit of a novelty. I grew up on the beach in South Africa. And at this time of year, normally we'd spend all day at the beach and then go for a barbecue. And if you put a candle out at this time, it would be in broad daylight at this time in the evening.

So coming to Scotland in the gloom is a bit of a treat and a novelty which I'm enjoying. Let me pray as we begin. Father, the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. Father, we thank you that you have sent your Son. We thank you that he is the light of the world we need.

[1 : 08] Please help us to gaze upon that light now. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. And before we begin, can I just say that if you are here tonight for the very first time, maybe you've wandered into church not knowing what's going to happen, and you've heard that reading in Isaiah earlier, and you've thought, what on earth is he on about?

You're in good company. You see, Isaiah is a prophet. He's the greatest of his generation of poets, and he's seen his country conquered.

He's seen his countrymen carried off. He's seen kings come and go. He's witnessed all of this, and he is writing his masterpiece. He is the greatest prophet, the greatest poet in a thousand years, and he's writing like a man possessed.

One of our students described coming to the Bible as spiritual crack, and that's not a bad explanation or understanding of what Isaiah is like.

He's writing like a man possessed, and he's firing on all six cylinders, and he's playing a blinder in this book. And what he's saying to you, so what I'm trying to say to you is if you come here and you feel intimidated by that reading, don't be.

[2 : 38] You're in good company. That's okay. And he's got one point, and he's making it in three bits. You've blown it, but that's not the end of the story.

God has sent his king. See, Isaiah, he's writing to a people who have utterly rejected God. They want nothing to do with God.

You might think that Britain's a post-Christian country today. Well, it's not a patch on what it was like in Israel in Isaiah's day. And Isaiah says to them, you've blown it.

Just look down at verse one of our reading. Maybe it'll come up on the screen, hopefully.

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

They're in gloom, and they are in distress. And as Isaiah spoke to them then, it's as relevant as it is to us tonight, as people who've turned away from God and said no to our Creator.

[3 : 45] We've blown it. We've said no to the God who created us, from whom all the good things in life flow, from whom family, friendship, joy, love, kindness, mercy, peace flow.

And we've chosen to go our own way, and we're in gloom and distress. We're in deep darkness. And the Bible's word for this, for this rejecting God and being in darkness and rejecting God's rule over us is sin.

And we've all done it. This was thinking back when I was really young. It took me quite a while to learn how to speak. I only started speaking at about six or something.

But before that time, I remember as a four-year-old going to the shop with my mum. It's always a treat. And I spotted something at the shop that I wanted. It was a kinder egg or something like that.

And I made this great show of when we got to the checkout of helping my mum do the checkout stuff. And what I did was I'd taken a kinder egg and I'd hid it under a bag of rice.

[5 : 00] And I made this great show of helping my mum carry this rice through. And what I'd really done was stolen this kinder egg. Before I could speak, I sinned.

I'd stolen. Why did I do that? I don't know. But my guess is that I'm not the only one tonight. My guess is that lots of us will look back at things we've done and think, why did I do that?

And the thing about darkness is that when we say darkness, sometimes we simply think we mean dimness, turning down of the lights. It's a bit dim in here tonight.

So we think that we're generally nice people. We're not in darkness. We may be a bit dim in some situations. But I wonder if you've ever been in deep darkness, so dark that you cannot see the hand in front of your face, groping about in darkness.

And you are powerless to help yourself. And what Isaiah is saying to us tonight, and what he wants us to understand, is that we're not in dimness, but we are in darkness.

[6 : 09] And we are powerless to help ourselves. We've blown it. But that's not the end of the story. Well, a couple of years ago, I went back home for Christmas in South Africa, and the house was packed.

And South Africa, rightly or wrongly, has a reputation for having crime. And the response that most South Africans make to that is they put up walls and defences.

So our house back home, it's a freestanding, detached house. And on the outside perimeter, there's this massive bush. It's called an Amantungulu bush. And it's got these massive, inch-long thorns, and it surrounds the whole house.

And behind the bush is a palisade, iron palisade fence, with spikes on top. And on top of the fence is barbed wire. And on top of the barbed wire is electric wires.

And that's simply to keep the monkeys out, never mention the criminals. And then inside of that fence, you've got this network of lasers or light switches, where if someone climbed over the fence, they tripped it, the alarm would go off.

[7 : 15] And then on the house itself, it's got burglar guards, thick, really thick burglars, screwed in. And because the house was so full, I had to sleep downstairs on the ground floor in the house, in the lounge.

And because I was sleeping in an unusual spot, I felt quite anxious. And it took me a little while to get to sleep. And as I lay there in the darkness and in the gloom, I started to hear a scratching.

Something at the window. And I was thinking, what could that be? What is that noise? And the noise continued. And it sounded as if someone was trying to unscrew a burglar guard.

They're trying to get a screwdriver between the window and the burglar guard and pull it off. And I started thinking to myself, what should I do? It sounded as if there was a burglar.

So I'll tell you what I did. But I quietly crawled out of the bed up to where the light switch was in the lounge. And I hit the light switch.

[8 : 25] I went, wah! And for a second, I could see the silhouette of a man in the window trying to break in. And then a crash and a bang as he fell off and ran out, ran away.

And the truth is, sometimes when you're in gloom and distress and deep darkness, you need a little light. And Isaiah writes this prophecy to a people who have blown it and they are in deep darkness. And life is going to get very hard for them. But he tells them that's not the end of the story. Just look down at verse 2 and 3 in our reading, if you can, in the dimness there.

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. And you might be looking at your life tonight and thinking, what harvest? What is the harvest?

[9 : 34] Where is the harvest? What am I meant to be rejoicing in? All I see in my life is barrenness, emptiness, gloom, distress, deep darkness.

But don't miss this. Don't miss the whole point of what Isaiah is writing and trying to tell us. He writes to a people who have blown it and he says, that's not the end of the story.

In the northern region of South Africa, there's a place called the Richtersfeld and it's on the border of the Namib Desert. And the Namib Desert is the hottest desert in the world. It is red.

It looks like Mars. And it's absolutely parched dry. And for years at a time, it is barren, completely barren. Nothing grows there. But lo and behold, when the rain comes down and the waters rise up,

the desert springs to life and these pans full with water, they touch the plan, and animals come from all over and the desert flourishes, flowers upon flowers for miles and miles and miles, daisies and beautiful lush flowers.

And Isaiah says that God will enlarge the nation. He will cause their joy to increase as people rejoice at the time of the harvest.

[11 : 01] And Isaiah's point is, as much as you have blown it, God's grace and mercy and kindness is more than enough to cover that.

You see, you can lift a person out the gutter and you can give them a bath and change their clothes and that's a relatively easy thing to do. But Isaiah says, God is not simply going to change your clothes.

He's going to do the hard thing. He's going to give you a new heart, a transformed mind and a transformed life. God is going to do the impossible. That stuff that puts you in the gutter, in the gloom, in the distress, in the deep darkness, all that sin stuff, God is going to wash away forever and you'll look back to where you were then and you'll look to where you are now and you'll ask yourself, how did that happen?

How did God do this? You've blown it. But that's not the end of the story. God has sent his king. And how were these, how are these great promises going to come about? I wonder if you might just look down to verse 6 there and they'll tell us that these promises will come about through the birth of a child.

[12 : 20] For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. A Christmas baby. A baby who'll die but be raised to life and become a king.

Who will rule on a throne, great King David's throne in verse 7. He will reign on David's throne. His kingdom will last forever and ever from that time on and forever.

His kingdom will be a kingdom of justice and righteousness and he'll do this as his father works through him. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

God has sent a baby who will grow up to be a king. God has sent his king. But how is this king going to fix the sin problem?

How is God going to put right the things that we have blown in our lives? That we, when we have blown our lives so badly? Well, later on in this prophecy, Isaiah tells us how this king became a servant who will die for us to fix the sin problem in our hearts and for when we have rejected God.

[13 : 33] So a little later in Isaiah, Martin preached on it this morning. We read in Isaiah 53, a few chapters later. But he, that's this king, he will be pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. And transgressions and iniquities, they are just a fancy word for sin. The punishment that brought us peace was on him.

And by his wounds we have been healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned our own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

You see, God has sent a king, a King Jesus, who takes sin so seriously for when we have blown it and rejected God, that he dies in our place for that rejection and takes the punishment that we deserve for rejecting God.

But God has also sent a king, King Jesus, who loves us so much that he dies in our place for our rejection to God, to redeem all the muck in our life and make us better than new, to make the barrenness bloom again and to bring us out of darkness and into the kingdom of glorious light.

[14 : 53] You've blown it, but that's not the end of the story. God has sent his king. And the message of Christmas is won't you follow this king?

Won't you put your hands up and admit that you've blown it? Won't you see that it's not the end of the story? Won't you ask King Jesus to be your king, who dies for your sin and brings light to your darkness?

Let me pray. So, Father, we admit that we have blown it, that we are in deep darkness.

Father, we are so grateful that that's not the end of the story. Father, we thank you for sending your son, King Jesus.

Please help us to hear him. Please help us to listen to him. Please help us to turn to him. And maybe for the first time and maybe for the hundredth time tonight.

[15 : 57] Amen. Amen. Thank you.