

The Promised King

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 December 2022

Preacher: Ali Sewell

[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, John. Thank you. Okay, as I said, we're looking at these couple of weeks, the very first Christmas being something that was promised, promised hundreds of years in advance by prophets like Isaiah, something that was looked forward to, something that was anticipated.

I think it's fair to say that still today, each year, we look forward to celebrating Christmas, don't we? Some people really love Christmas. Maybe you're the sort of person who has been planning for months already, or your house is like a kind of Santa's grotto.

Christmas gets you really excited. Or perhaps that's not you. Perhaps when you think of Christmas, the first thing that comes to mind is just lots of things to do, lots of things to get ready, lots of things to sort, lots of expense.

Perhaps for you, Christmas means busyness. Christmas, or perhaps for some of us as well, Christmas can be a hard time or a lonely time. But actually, you'll be quite happy just to get rid of Christmas, get it out of the way for another year.

For a lot of people, Christmas is a difficult time. People have all sorts of feelings about Christmas. Christmas comes with different baggage for all of us.

[1 : 1 8] And yet, however we might feel about Christmas, whatever our attitude to what it is, we won't be able to help but notice that for the next few weeks, Christmas will be the big focus of people's attention.

Adverts will be Christmassy. Houses will be Christmassy. Shops will be Christmassy. Events will be Christmassy. All sorts of things going on as people look ahead to Christmas.

And why is that? Why is Christmas such a big deal still in our world? Well, I think that a lot of it is perhaps because Christmas offers a bit of a break from the norm.

Christmas is something special. Christmas is a time when we're encouraged to have a little bit of festive cheer. We're encouraged to put the difficulties of real life perhaps on hold and just to relax.

I read an article that said this, instead of facing reality, it's easier to just go into Christmas dreamland and pretend everything is okay.

[2 : 2 3] And I'm sure that that is a motivation for a lot of people. Perhaps that resonates with you this morning. And actually, even as we think about that, it's such a stark reminder, isn't it, that our lives and our world aren't all okay.

That things aren't all just as we'd like them to be. There are parts of reality, as that article said, that we don't want to face up to. We are looking for something more.

Sometimes Christmas can seem like a bit of a sticking plaster to put over those difficult things that we'd just rather not think about. Well, I think as we turn to the Bible, as it speaks about Christmas, especially in passages like this from Isaiah written before Christmas, looking ahead to that first Christmas, we get this incredibly rich picture of Christmas because we see as well the need for Christmas.

We get this incredibly realistic picture, recognising that actually the world isn't as it should be, but also the incredible truth that because of Christmas, things can be far, far better than we could ever imagine.

The Bible promises us that Christmas isn't just about papering over the cracks. It's not just a time when people can forget by going out and having a good time, by eating and drinking a bit too much, by getting more stuff that we think will make us happy, a temporary fix.

[3 : 50] Instead, the Bible tells us that because of Christmas, we can have real hope in a permanent solution. That actually, because of Christmas, things really have changed forever.

And really, that's what these verses are all about. Two things, that something better is coming because someone better is coming. So let's have a look at that.

First, something better is coming. These verses in Isaiah are pretty common, Christmas verses. You've probably heard them read at Christmas things before, and rightly so.

You can almost feel that kind of sense of hope rising as you listen to them or as they're read to us. They talk about something good on the horizon, that something better is coming, as we've said.

But it's good to see actually why that's needed because as Isaiah is writing, and this is hundreds of years before the first Christmas, as he writes, clearly things are not all good.

[4 : 51] Clearly there is actually pain in the present as Isaiah writes these words. You see, verse 1, the starting point is that the people are in anguish.

The land has been brought into contempt, it says. Verse 2, the people are walking in darkness. Actually, the background here to this passage in Isaiah is that the people Isaiah was writing to, the people of Israel, who are supposed to be kind of God's special people, well, they had rejected God.

Their king had failed to trust in God. They hadn't been living for God. And so God had let them be taken away by another nation, by a nation called the Assyrians. We sang at the beginning of our service, so come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here.

Well, that is the background to what Isaiah is writing and what we're looking at this morning. Really, it is doom and gloom. It is God's people away from where they're supposed to be in exile, away from home, at a time of sorrow and hardship.

I think one of the reasons that the Bible speaks about Christmas, that the need for Christmas, the promised Christmas, one of the reasons that it is so powerful and that it remains so relevant to us is because the Bible's message of Christmas does not begin by saying, isn't everything just brilliant?

[6 : 19] Isn't everything wonderful? Let's decorate a tree and eat a turkey just to celebrate how great it all is. I know it actually begins by saying there is hardship, that there is darkness, there is pain.

It actually also says that all of us have done things, have lived in ways which have added to that problem, added to the problem of our separation from other people, and most importantly, that the problem of our separation from God himself.

The Bible does say, actually, yeah, things aren't as they should be, but that Christmas is all about how God has promised to do something about that, that something better is coming.

Verse 2, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. That's interesting, Isaiah actually writes that kind of in the past tense, doesn't he?

He's writing as if it's something that's already happened, but actually what Isaiah was speaking about hadn't happened yet, and yet he is so certain of it that Isaiah can write about it as if it's already a done deal that the final verse, verse 7, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

[7 : 32] Because Isaiah knows this is God's work, this is what God will do, this is what God has promised, then it is a cast-iron certainty that this is what will happen. So what has God promised?

Well, the promise is that this light will come, that into this darkness that a great light will shine. Now, lights are such a big part of our Christmas celebrations, aren't they, this evening?

We'll be there for the switching on of the lights in Haddington. That's another plug to come along at 5.15 and join in with the carols. People will have lights going up in their homes and in their gardens.

I always remember growing up, there was a couple of houses at the end of our street who got involved in what I can only describe as like a Christmas arms race, trying to constantly kind of outdo one another year by year, sucking in all the electricity from like miles around.

I was in Edinburgh last week, if you've been into Edinburgh recently, great lights there in the festival. It's amazing to look at, it's beautiful. You know, we love lights at Christmas. That love for lights seems undiminished by any kind of energy crisis or anything like that.

[8 : 41] And yet we know that actually these Christmas lights don't last forever. They're out and they're bright and they're brilliant and then they're done and they're packed away and you're left trying to fit a giant illuminated reindeer in the loft for the next 11 months or whatever it is.

You know, the lights are on but then they're off. And yet the light that Isaiah is speaking about, the light that the Bible has promised for that first Christmas wasn't just something that would come and provide a bit of temporary relief or enjoyment.

It was something that would change everything forever. This light that shows as we've been saying that something better is coming and the Bible's clear that the light that was coming and has now come is Jesus Christ.

As Jesus is born on that first Christmas, the Apostle John writes, the true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world. Because Jesus has come, everything changes.

Look at how Isaiah describes these changes. Verse 2, he says, 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.

[10 : 02] You hear that real emphasis on joy there, lasting joy, the joy of harvest, the joy of victory. Why is there this joy? Where does it come from? Does it say, well the light will come with a toiletries gift set for everyone or a turkey or a week of holiday, that that's where this joy will come?

Well there's much more than that, isn't it? 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.

Isaiah says there's joy coming because there's freedom. That which had enslaved the people will be broken and done away with.

He looks back to past examples of that like on the day of Midian that's talking about another story in the Bible and yet this time there will be a rescue for all time. There will be rescue, there will be deliverance and secondly through that there will be peace.

Verse 5, for every boot of the trampling warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

[11 : 10] These garments of war, this kind of blood-spattered clothing will be done away with and will be no longer needed because there will be an end to this battle. Ultimately, the light will come and the light will win.

Something better is coming says Isaiah. Something better is promised. Freedom and peace that bring real and lasting joy is coming because God is going to do something because this light is coming into the world and will win the victory.

At Christmas we celebrate something better. Now before we carry on let me try and perhaps anticipate a question that might come into your mind.

Here's Isaiah looking forward to the first Christmas promising something special promising something better. Here we are hundreds of years later looking back at that first Christmas. And perhaps you might be tempted to ask as you look around as you think of the world that we live in well is this it?

Well actually has this promise been fulfilled? Is this that we're living through? Is this the something better as good as it gets? That's a really good question.

[12 : 26] I just want us to hold on to that question for a moment. If that's come into your head please we'll come back to that in a minute. But for now let's just recognize let's just remember that in this time of Christmas where it feels like every advert is kind of full of smiles where there's this pressure that of course you must be happy and everything must be wonderful and you must be loving it.

Well actually the Bible takes seriously that the world is a tough place. that is not all as it should be but it promises that something better is coming.

And why is that going to happen? How is that possible? Well that brings us on to the second half of this passage which shows us that something better is coming because someone better is coming.

Someone better is coming. Let me read from verse 6 these great words 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 uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this this promise is possible this promise will come into fruition because the promised one will come and let's not beat around the bush here this is Jesus that we're speaking about Isaiah is pointing us forward to the coming of Jesus Christ that first Christmas but look how Jesus is described he's described as a ruler the government shall be upon his shoulders not just any ruler that he's also divine he's God himself

Wonderful Counselor Mighty God Everlasting Father Prince of Peace these are names for God the picture that Isaiah wants us to have in our minds of this someone who is coming of the child born the son given isn't so much the picture of the baby in the manger that we'll see plenty of around Christmas we don't read about this mighty one seated on his throne overseeing his kingdom in order that we might say oh isn't he sweet that's nice isn't it no the picture is of God himself come to rule of an all encompassing rule of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end a perfect rule he will uphold and establish his kingdom with justice and righteousness an eternal rule from this time forth and forever more this is a picture of the promised king who will make things right something better is coming the light bringing joy because there is freedom and peace because someone better is coming the promised king who will rule perfectly over all things and bring about the world we all long for the world

[15 : 39] God had planned from the beginning something better is coming because someone better is coming is Isaiah's message in these verses okay let me tell you a bit of a secret as we carry on it's not a great secret this will be like one of those kind of clickbait articles you get online 12 things your minister doesn't want you to know you won't believe number 5 well here it is this is number 5 and it's this that that just brace yourself here that ministers don't really like Christmas that's the kind of the big secret and that's not just me I've got a sample size of two or three other people so it's statistically significant there but ministers don't really like Christmas of course we do of course we do Christmas is great but job wise it's a tough time of the year why well because it happens every single year also because there are a lot of services and assemblies and other things and yet all of that is fine except for this this is the hard bit there is not that much in the Bible that talks about

Christmas as we see it on the Christmas cards and so theologically God coming to earth the incarnation as it's called Emmanuel God with us it is hugely significant but when it actually comes around to the baby Jesus around the wise men and the shepherds you know you've probably got about three chapters of the Bible that you're working with there's a few other well known prophecies like this one in Isaiah and I think it was with all that in mind I had this slight sense of unease this week a bit of a lack of confidence we looked at this passage in Isaiah 9 at Christmas before and I just started to think hasn't everyone already heard this am I just kind of repackaging the same stuff again and I kind of thought about that for a while and I came to the conclusion that the answer is yes that's exactly what we're doing we have heard this before we have been here before the meaning of this passage is the same as it was last year and the year before and all the other years you've heard it but the thing that encouraged me was this that actually what better message to hear what better message to repeat what better message to remind ourselves of the darkest and the coldest time of the year a joyful time of the year absolutely but also a time when any of our difficulties or our sorrows or our loneliness can seem so magnified as they're seen in contrast to that kind of fictional unending cheer and happy endings of feel good

Christmas films and messages that will be all over our screens what better to hear again than the promise that something better is coming because someone better is coming or rather for us looking back to the first Christmas something better is coming because someone better has come ultimately make things right with our world but the zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this and so it is absolutely certain and this is as

Ewan was saying as we were talking to the young guys you can feel like we're saying the same message again and again you feel like you know what the punchline is going to be and yet what better message to remind ourselves of time and time again of what is coming because of what Jesus has done and so without in mind let me just finish by going back to that question that we raised earlier the Bible's message of Christmas is that something better is coming because someone better has come but perhaps we still have that question well where is this better thing Jesus has come and we've had the first Christmas the light has come into the darkness and yet still we see plenty of darkness around so is this it or where is this better thing this better world promise this deliverance this peace this joy well the Bible's answer to that question is that what God has promised comes to us really in kind of two stages that actually we can have this now that Christmas really does make a difference in the present but that still there is something greater to come you could try and explain it like this I'm not always the best

Christmas presents or birthday presents in general I suppose but sometimes I really do pull it out of the bag so it's okay and last year I got for Julie my wife for her birthday tickets to see the Lion King at the theatre we'd meant to go a few years ago and we just didn't for some reason but this time I thought I'll get there early I got the tickets it was all good so on her birthday she got these tickets and yet the actual show wasn't for a few months and I suppose the point of what I'm trying to show is it's good to get tickets for something isn't it having a ticket really means something it makes a difference it is very different to having no ticket you can open that present and say wow what an amazing present what a thoughtful husband how happy how joyful I am it's good it's a good present but actually the fullness of that present is still to come the fulfillment the full benefit is when that show happens a few months later and you get to go and be part of that well in a similar way because of that first Christmas things really have changed that Jesus has come the king has arrived he showed throughout his time on earth in his teaching in his miracles in the way he dealt with people even those who were thought of as the lowest of the low Jesus showed pictures of this perfect kingdom he was bringing his perfect rule of the justice and righteousness we spoke about but more than that

[22 : 14] Jesus the king came to suffer and we'll speak more about this next week but Jesus the king died to pay the penalty for injustice and unrighteousness he did that so that people like us who don't always get it right who are far from perfect could be forgiven and so have a place in his perfect kingdom it's important we remember at Christmas that that has happened Jesus has achieved that if we trust in Jesus we have that ticket as it were that makes all the difference not just in the future but for the present as well I think I can find it really easy to kind of default to simply saying yes there is something better to come and there is but also we need to fight to remember that this does make all the difference in the present as well and the promised king has come and that does change everything we can have joy here and now even in the midst of difficult situations because Jesus has brought that freedom that deliverance not from human authorities but rather from the authority that hold the consequence of sin in our lives that sin the wrong stuff we've done the way we haven't loved God or other people as we should which would rightly would keep us out of any perfect kingdom of the something better that we all long for but Jesus has delivered us so that we can be part of that through what Jesus has done we really can have peace with God we can be restored into a perfect relationship with him here and now as his people the light has come that Jesus has brought deliverance has brought peace so we can have that joy again not a joy that is based on on temporary

Christmassy things but a joy based on an eternal relationship with God and as we think of the eternal nature that points us forward doesn't it about what is still to come the fulfillment of the Bible's promise about Christmas that there is still something better to come there is still the fulfillment of this perfect kingdom at the moment the light still shines in the darkness but in the end that the darkness will be no more when Jesus is perfect rule and justice and righteousness will be seen by all when those who hear and now enjoy that relationship that with God that Jesus has made possible by trusting in him that will be welcomed into the perfection of his eternal kingdom to enjoy that perfect joy not tainted by any darkness this December as the run up to Christmas starts to kick up a gear we want to remember for ourselves we want to share with others as well that Christmas is all about Jesus the promised king that something better is here now and even better to come because someone better Jesus the promised king has come and because of him we truly can have joy in the present enjoying a genuine relationship with

God himself and look forward to the fullness of that joy when Jesus the promised king returns let's let's pray together Heavenly Father we thank you that the light has come that Jesus has come into our world that he came as a baby as we'll be reminded of plenty of times this month but that he came as the promised king the wonderful counselor mighty God everlasting father prince of peace who will reign forever in perfect righteousness and justice Lord we thank you that through the work of Jesus we can be part of his perfect kingdom that we can be forgiven and brought back to you we can we thank you that that means we can be certain of a perfect eternity with you but also that means that we can have joy and peace here in the present as well Lord we pray this advent and beyond that we would enjoy you that we would worship you and that we would live for you as people of your kingdom not because of what we've done but because of what you the

Lord of hosts has done for us through Jesus and we pray all these things for your glory and in his name Amen do you have you zooming out