

Isaiah 9v2-7
The Incarnate God

I hope the Christmas carol we just sang [*O Come, O come Immanuel*] didn't unsettle you too much! But I do hope it unsettled you a bit. There are two reasons why I requested it. First, because it's about what we're going to be looking at together over the next few minutes. But I also picked it to make a point.

At Christmas, we talk about the birth of the Lord Jesus, don't we. For a couple of weeks, we don't really talk about anything else in church. But then we forget about it.

Do we think that Christmas isn't really relevant for the rest of the year, for the rest of our lives? If we think it's just a lovely story and a chance for the kids to dress up, then we will think that. But what I want us to see this morning is that what we celebrate at Christmas – God becoming a human being – is a vital part of his rescue plan for the whole of humanity. If we leave Christmas out, the whole thing falls apart.

We're going to see that as we look at the passage we just read. It was written by a guy called Isaiah, about 2700 years ago (700 years before the New Testament starts). Isaiah was a prophet, a messenger from God, and he's speaking to Ahaz, King of Judah. Isaiah has some pretty scary warnings for Ahaz. But in amongst them is the passage we're looking at.

The first thing to see in this passage is **the Promise of Rescue (v2-5)**.

Look at the last verse of chapter 8. “Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness” (8v22). It's the tail end of what God has to say about the consequences of turning away from him.

At this point, Judah is under attack from Israel and Syria, who themselves have Assyria breathing down their neck. The kings of Israel and Syria want to force Judah to side with them against Assyria by putting their own king on Ahaz's throne.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Ahaz makes things worse in the way he responds to the threat. The smart response would have been to turn to God and trust him. The whole of their history has shown that things go well when they honour God, and badly when they don't. But, instead, Ahaz decides to take matters into his own hands. In chapters 7 and 8 of Isaiah, we read what the consequences are, for Israel and Syria, and for Judah.

So things are looking pretty grim for Judah. A desperate situation made worse by an arrogant king. What they need is something to give them hope. What they need is to be rescued.

Chapter 9 begins on a note of hope. Against the dark background of chapter 8, a light comes on. “There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress” (v1) – the darkness isn't permanent. Imagine what a ray of hope that must have been for anyone hearing or reading this. Verse 2 carries on the theme of darkness and light.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (v2)

Don't be confused – remember he's talking about the future. Isaiah has no difficulty talking about these future things as if they have happened – if God has promised them, it's the same thing.

Isaiah explains to us the effects of the rescue before he tells us how it will happen. God promises **JOY**: “*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” (v3).

The picture of joy is a powerful one. Imagine you've been slogging away all year, and then you're finally able to bring in the food you've worked so hard for. Or you've been fighting a war and you're finally able to divide the plunder that's been won in battle. That's the kind of joy he's talking about.

The reason for their joy is even more astonishing than the fact that they are joyful. They have freedom and peace. In the middle of all the difficulty and strife they're facing, and after God has warned them of invasions and attacks to come, freedom and peace are two things it was probably too much to even hope for. But that's exactly what is promised. The instruments of oppression – the yoke, the bar, the rod – will all be destroyed. They'll be free. And soldiers will be able to burn their uniforms. They won't need them any more - they'll be more use as fuel for the fire.

The darkness won't go on forever. God has a rescue plan sorted out. Darkness will turn to light. Their fear will turn to joy. Their oppression will turn to freedom. War will turn to peace.

But how?

God doesn't just promise a rescue here – he also gives them **the Promise of a Rescuer** to bring it about.

“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 Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase 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 for ever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this” (v6-7)

I don't know about you, but that passage always reminds me of one of the classic pieces of Christmas music. *“When a Child is Born”* by Johnny Mathis (and since covered by... everyone). Now I wouldn't suggest you learn too much theology from Christmas songs, but this one has quite a lot going for it (more than some Christmas carols – *Good King Who?*!). Particularly the spoken bit in the middle. But the most important bit is the refrain, “this comes to pass when a child is born.” That's exactly what Isaiah goes on to say. These incredible things, this incredible rescue. This comes to pass when a child is born.

This isn't the first time Isaiah's brought this up. Back in chapter 7 he mentioned a child called Immanuel. Immanuel means God with us, and he would be a sign for everyone of God at work. But here he puts flesh on the bones and explains just who this child will be.

One thing we learn is that He'll be royalty. Do you see the names he's given in verse 6. One of them is Prince of Peace. “The Government will be on his shoulders” (v6). “He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom” (v7). Of the Increase of his government... there will be no end.”

But he will also be God.

Look again at the names the boy is given in verse 6. We've look at Prince of Peace. But He's also called Mighty God. Some people try to play that down - “actually, it only means great hero.” But that's not the most obvious way of reading it. And in chapter 10 of the same book, Isaiah uses the same phrase, Mighty God, to talk about God. Isaiah is saying quite simply that this boy will be God. The other names back it up - He's called Wonderful Counsellor (another phrase which Isaiah uses to talk about God).

And He's called Everlasting Father. That's a strange thing to say about a boy who hasn't even been born yet, isn't it? But it's a striking picture. This boy will be someone who will care for the people. But they won't have to grow up and learn to manage without him. He will be an Everlasting Father – he will always be there.

So Isaiah explains that the boy will be Royalty, and he will be God. And he will be the one to bring joy and peace and freedom. And we see what his rule will be like.

At this point, it seems as if the king, and the kingdom, is finished. Isaiah has been warning of an invasion, and he's facing attacks from all sides. It seems like too much to hope for. But the line of kings will continue, and when this child is born, he'll be king forever. And he'll be a good king, a great king, better than any they've ever had before. He'll establish the kingdom and uphold it “with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (v7). “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.”

So that's Isaiah's promise. Things look dismal. But there is hope. God's people will be rescued. They'll rejoice in their peace and freedom. And it will all happen when a child is born. A child who will be called “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” A child who will be King, and who will be God, and who will bring the rescue that God has promised, ushering in a new era.

It all sounds a bit too good to be true, doesn't it. Who is this child, and what on earth does it have to do with us, 2000 years later and 6000 miles away?

Well, that brings me to my third point... **The Rescuer Arrives**

Turn with me to Luke chapter 2, verses 10 (page 1028 RCBs. You might want to keep a finger in Isaiah 9 too).

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.’” (Luke 2v10-14)

Recognise anything familiar? The angel brings good news of *great joy*. Great joy because *a baby has been born* in the town of King David. Not just any baby, but a Saviour! The news of the birth prompts a choir of angels to sing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.”

This is God's promise, through Isaiah, being fulfilled. Look in verse 11 - the angel calls him **Christ, the Lord**. Christ was the Greek title for the one the Jewish people were waiting for. They waited 700 years for the Christ. And here, with the birth of a little boy in Bethlehem, the Christ arrives.

At first glance, it looks like there must have been some kind of mistake. The baby is lying in a feeding trough, and the birth is announced to shepherds, who dangled from the lowest rung of society. If God were to come into the world, surely that isn't how it would happen?! And we know what happens later. Only a week ago we celebrated Easter. This boy grew up, and ended up living like a tramp. Then he allowed himself to be captured, beaten, abused and executed. If God were to come into the world, surely that isn't how it would happen?

The reason is that Jesus isn't the king they were expecting, but he IS the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise. He IS the rescuer promised by God. He DOES bring the rescue God promised. But the implications are infinitely wider, the scale is massively bigger than it first appears...

The promise was for more than just Ahaz and his people. It was for more than even the Jewish race. Look again at verse 10 of Luke chapter 2. "*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*" The promise is thrown open wide to anyone who will trust in Christ.

Through Isaiah, God promised peace. Christ brings peace, but not the kind of peace they were expecting. Ahaz and his people were guilty of rejecting God, but so are we. We've all turned our backs on him and ignored him. And that makes us his **enemies**. It's a strong way of putting it, but those are the terms the Bible uses.

We live in a world which is ravaged by war and hostility, and we can look around and think that what the kind of peace the world most needs is an end to war. But the kind of peace the world really needs is peace with God. All the war and unrest in the world is nothing compared to being at war with the one who made and sustains the universe.

Christ came into the world as our rescuer to make that peace possible. He died to pay for our rejection of God, and to put things right. Christ died, and now we can be forgiven by God. Instead of hostility, there can be peace between us. Once our relationship with God is sorted out, we're in the right position to start sorting our differences. Otherwise it's as much use as giving paracetamol to someone who needs a heart bypass – it might look hopeful, but ultimately it is useless.

Through Isaiah, God also promised freedom. Christ brings freedom, but, again, a different kind of freedom. Christ offers freedom from sin and death.

Ahaz would have been interested in freedom from his enemies. Although Judah held out for a few more years, it was eventually conquered and was ruled over by one empire after another. So the kind of freedom they were looking for was no doubt a very real. And, again, as we look around our world we see many who desperately need freedom, whether it is from actual captivity, or from oppression or poverty.

But the Bible says we're all held captive by something far worse than politics or poverty. Our attitude towards God has left us in a mess. Now our natural state is to be turned away from God, and the consequence is death. There's nothing *we* can do about it. And it now seems so natural that we think death is the inevitable end to life - but it isn't supposed to be.

When Christ died, he dealt with the problem once and for all. But he dealt with the effects too. He dealt with the evil that grips the world, and its ultimate conclusion, death. When Christ died, he didn't stay dead. Three days later he came back to life, and he's still alive. Now there is hope. A light has come on in the darkness. Christ brings the ultimate kind of freedom. And how can any of us who know that freedom possibly stand by and allow others to endure oppression and captivity. For Christians, our complete freedom should motivate us to fight for freedom for others.

And, of course, through Isaiah God promised joy. You've probably worked out what I'm going to say - Christ brings joy. But it is so much better than the joy of reaping a harvest or winning a battle. It's more than knowing that there is a chance for peace and that we're freed from sin and death. Through what Christ has done, we can experience the mind-boggling, heart-exploding joy of knowing God our creator! We can know him as we should – as our creator, as our Father. And it's so much better than any joy we might think we've had, because it will never fail or fade. It will last

for all eternity!

This peace, this freedom, this joy all begin now if you trust Jesus with your life. But there is more to come. If we trust Christ, then we can look forward to a future where all of these these are complete. A future where every last trace of evil and hate and suffering are removed, and where will experience the joy of spending eternity with God. And then we'll really see what God was promising all those centuries ago.

2700 years ago, God made a promise to his people, through Isaiah and King Ahaz. He reminded them of his rescue plan. He told them they would know joy, and freedom and peace.

It turned out the promise was bigger and better than they probably could have imagined. And the same promise is open to each of us.

How?

I'll let Johnny (Mathis) have the last word:

“A ray of hope flickers in the sky
A tiny star lights up way up high
All across the land, dawns a brand new morn
This comes to pass when a child is born”

Let's pray...