

# The Answer to our Fear (Isaiah 9:2-7)

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Date: 04 August 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ]     So Isaiah chapter 9 verse...

The bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boots used in battle and every garment rolled in blood 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. It's a real joy to be here with you on Theology Sunday. I don't know if you know how special that is. Quite unique that a church, certainly in my context, a church setting aside a Sunday, a week every year, to think about the value of plunging into Scripture and hearing what the church throughout the ages has reflected and said about God's Word, so that you might come to know God more fully and be equipped to participate in his mission more fully in the world.

[ 1 : 46 ]     Wherever Jesus leads you, to set aside a day to think about that, and then to raise funds to resource and support anyone who responds to that call to do a video training.

That's really, really cool. And I just want to commend you for that. And I hope that you do contribute to the scholarship fund. And I'm praying that there might be someone here who, even tonight, hears the Spirit of Jesus whispering to them, saying, I want you to do that.

I actually want you to do some study like that. But that's not the focus of the message tonight. I want to focus on something else, something that is very much a message to me at the moment.

And we read about this theme in Isaiah chapter 9. And perhaps a good way to start is by sharing with you something I've been reflecting on as I read my email each week.

I get a regular weekly email from The Economist magazine. I'm signed up to their news feed. And I noticed the other week that there's a theme to a number of the headlines that I'm reading at the moment.

[ 2 : 51 ]     So take a look at the screen up here. Hopefully you can see that. Let me just read to you very quickly some of the headlines that I've been reading. Here's the first one. What to fear about generative AI?

That's the first one. Okay, what about the second one? How to worry wisely about artificial intelligence? Or this one. Why fear is spreading in financial markets?

Number four. Investors have reason to fear a strong economy. And then four more. How scary is China?

This is a Western magazine you will appreciate. Or fear of China is pushing India and Japan into each other's arms. A year after its liberation, Kurson in the Ukraine still knows fear and defines.

And one more. How fear has shaped human affairs. Now, do you notice a theme there? There's a little bit of a theme.

[ 3 : 58 ] And the theme is that fear hangs like a shadow over our world today. Now, these words that we read from Isaiah chapter 9, these words were spoken to people living under the dark shadow of fear.

Because Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah, he was speaking these words to people who were very afraid. Their world quite literally was collapsing.

If you know the context, it was about the 8th century before the time of Christ. So many, many years ago. Nearly three millennia ago. And at that time, Assyria, the dominant military and economic power in the Middle East, was slowly devouring all of the smaller, less powerful nations around it.

And in 732 BC, the king of Assyria, Teglath-Pileser, invades the northern kingdom of Israel, what we now know as the region of Galilee. And here is a relief.

Some stones that have been excavated by archaeologists. And they depict the Assyrian armies besieging some foreign towns. And then after about 10 years of sustained warfare, the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom of Israel, was destroyed.

[ 5 : 20 ] And so here, take a look. Here's another relief. This relief has been excavated. And it shows Teglath-Pileser with his foot on the head, trampling one of his defeated enemies.

So think about this. Even as Isaiah is speaking these words, here in Isaiah chapter 9, the Assyrian armies are gathered, poised on the borders of Judah, the lower kingdom, just below Israel.

And the people, they can hear the boots of the trampling soldiers. They can see their garments that have been stained in the blood of their countrymen across the border.

And they know that they are no match for this force of death and destruction that is poised on their border. Darkness is descending on their world, on the people of Judah.

The shadow of fear hangs over them. Their world is quite literally about to collapse. They know it could collapse at any moment. Have you ever felt like that?

[ 6 : 28 ] Have you ever felt like your world could collapse at any moment? Have you felt gripped by fear? I have.

I've felt like that. I often feel like that, if I'm honest. Well, to people feeling like that, into this distress and this darkness, the word of the Lord comes.

We read it, Isaiah chapter 9. And the word of the Lord, if you were to summarize it, is this. Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Why?

Because, the text says, the Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts, will deliver his people from the enemy. What will that look like?

What will that deliverance look like? Well, look at the first half of our passage. It describes what God will do. Verse 2, he will make light shine in the darkness. Have you got your Bibles open?

[ 7 : 33 ] I hope so. Verse 3, he will make joy spring up in the gloom. Verse 4, he will make freedom break through oppression.

Verse 5, he will make peace triumph over war. Four great promises. Light in the darkness, joy in gloom, freedom in the face of oppression, and peace where there was strife.

Four great promises. That's what God promises to do for his people. And we're going to come back to that. I want to spend most of our time lingering on those promises. But just very quickly, how will he do that?

How's God going to do that? According to the prophet Isaiah? Well, look at the second half of the passage. Again, I hope you've got your Bibles open. Look at verse 6. 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. So when this child is born, when this son is given, these four great promises are going to be fulfilled.

[ 8 : 53 ] So that begs the question, who is this child? Who is this son to be given? Well, look at his names. Look at the names that we read there in verses 6 and 7.

It says he'll be called Wonderful Counselor. That word, which is translated in English, Wonderful, it actually means inconceivable, incomprehensible, supernatural even.

So this prince, this one to come, will be a counselor who will guide his people with incredible, supernatural, divine wisdom and insight and knowledge.

And then look at the next title, Everlasting Father. This is interesting. Nowhere else in ancient literature is this term used as a title for a prince or a king.

It speaks of a father's commitment to his children. A good father's compassion for his children, care of his children.

[ 9 : 59 ] So this child to be born will embody this kind of faithfulness. And then look at the third title, Prince of Peace.

That word prince there, it actually signifies an army commander. But a commander, an army commander, who ironically, his war making will mean the end of war.

He's not really interested in war. He wants to finish war and bring peace to his people. And the word translated peace that we read here is the Hebrew word shalom, which I guess many of you will have heard.

And it means so much more than peace. Peace is not a very accurate translation because it means wholeness, fullness, flourishing, blessing.

This child to be born will bring blessing and fullness to his people. So who is this child to be born? Who is this son to be given?

[ 11 : 01 ] Well, the gospel writers, as many of you will know, Matthew and Luke and others, they tell us that this child to be born is Jesus.

And because Jesus was born to us, we can have hope in the face of fear. Because Jesus was given to us, has been given to us, these promises can be fulfilled.

And so in the time that remains, can we spend a little bit of time reflecting on what these promises might mean for us? Because Jesus has come and these promises have been fulfilled.

They're ours. So what do they mean for us? Because you didn't come to hear an esoteric lecture about some theological truths out there. You came to hear what the word of God is saying to you in your life, in your world today.

So let's hear what God might want to say to us through these four promises. So the first one is this. Because the child has been born, we can know light in darkness. Look at verse 2.

[ 12 : 09 ] The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. Now in the Bible, this image of darkness is a really rich one.

This motif of darkness can symbolize many things. On the one hand, firstly, it can symbolize evil. Darkness represents evil or trouble or death.

So Psalm 23, even though I walk through the darkest valley, or some translations, the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

So it can mean evil or death. But then darkness can also symbolize in the Bible the complete absence of God. So you may remember when Jesus is crucified, when the Son of God dies on a cross, Matthew, the Gospel writer, says that darkness covered the whole land.

And from within that darkness, the Son of God cries out at the top of His voice, with all that He's got left, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The absence of God.

[ 13 : 25 ] And then thirdly, darkness also symbolizes in the Bible often blindness. Or confusion. A few weeks ago, our three young adult children in our household, Emma, Sophie, Daniel, they decided for some reason to do the TikTok baking challenge.

So I don't know if you're familiar with this challenge, but Emma, our eldest, 21-year-old, she put on a gag around her mouth so that she couldn't speak to her siblings. And Daniel, our youngest, he put on some headphones and turned the music right up so he could destroy his hearing and couldn't hear his sisters.

And then Sophie, our middle child, she put on a blindfold so that she couldn't see anything. And then together, they set about trying to bake a batch of cookies.

And I was watching the whole thing from the dining room. And I thought to myself as I watched this, I am not going to eat any of those cookies. I saw what a mess they were making.

And then secondly, I thought to myself, I really, most of all, I feel compassion right now for Sophie. With her blindfold. Because she was just wandering blindly around the kitchen, groping in the darkness.

[ 14 : 44 ] Do you know what it's like to wander around blindly, groping in the darkness? I do.

You receive a diagnosis from the doctor. Or maybe you receive a really troubling report at work. And you feel confused.

You feel alone. Sometimes you feel like you want to cry out at the top of your voice, like Jesus did. My God, where are you?

Why have you forsaken me? Have you ever felt like that? If you have, hear the word of God.

Listen to the promise here in Isaiah 9. Because the child has been born, darkness does not have the last word.

[ 15 : 50 ] Jesus, the light, Jesus, the light, shines into the darkness. And as the gospel writer says, John says, the darkness cannot overcome it.

The one who said, let there be light. The one who can turn darkness into light. He experienced on the cross. The absolute darkness of God's complete absence, so that we never have to.

So when you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, the darkest valley, whatever it may be, know that God is with you.

Your wonderful counselor, he's guiding you. Because the son has been born, because Jesus has been given, you can know light in the darkness.

Okay, there's a second promise here though. Let's move on. Because the child has been born, we can know joy in gloom. Look at verse 3. Isaiah says, You, God, have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.

[ 17 : 06 ] And they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. So Isaiah here is drawing on two images from his world, two images of joy, two archetypal images of joy.

The first one is the joy of a harvest gathered. When all the crops from the season have been gathered into the barns, they're now safe from the elements, and abundance is guaranteed for another year.

That's the first image of joy. And the second image that we see here is the joy of a battle won, where the enemy, the threatening enemy has been defeated, and the victorious soldiers are dividing up the plunder.

That's an image of joy from the ancient Near East. What would be the equivalent images in our world today? Maybe it would be Portia Woodman and the Black Ferns cheering with delight, screaming with delight at the final whistle as it declares them Olympic champions yet again.

Or maybe it would be Christopher Luxon and his campaign team cheering with delight as they see the results coming through, the final results on election night. Or maybe it would be John Tucker, 25 years ago, listening with delight to the most beautiful woman in the world say the words, I do.

[ 18 : 38 ] 25 years ago, last month. Joy! Come on, you're such a flat congregation! Isn't that joy? Like, seriously, if you've ever stood at the front of a church and heard those words, I do, from the most beautiful person in the world, bar Jesus, that's joy.

Now that's the image that's being evoked in this passage, joy. But I just want to name the reality that for some of us right now, inevitably, in a room with this many people, it would be fair to estimate that today is not a time of joy.

That you're in a season that's not one of deep joy, it's one of deep sadness. For me, this last year has been one of deep sadness.

It's been a year of grief. My brother passed away tragically and suddenly in America. And then, just a few weeks later, my mum passed away. And there have been other equally deep and painful griefs for me this year.

It hasn't been a time of great joy, it's been a time of deep grief. And I imagine that for some of you, you don't identify with me at the moment, this last few months has not been one of deep grief for you, deep sadness.

[ 20 : 04 ] But I imagine that for a number of you, nor is it a time of deep joy. Because whatever joy, you experience, if you're honest, it's built on the shifting sands of your changing circumstances.

And so whatever joy you feel is like blue sky in an Auckland winter. It's so fleeting. There's joy for a moment, blue sky for a moment, and then it's very quickly crowded out by the clouds of anxiety.

Listen to the word of God to us in Isaiah 9. Don't just look at your circumstances. Don't focus just on your losses or your griefs or your needs.

Focus on the child that's been given, the son that's been given to you. Listen to the word of Isaiah 9. Your divine hero or warrior or champion has fought on your behalf a battle that you could not win, a battle that you could not fight.

And he has won such a spectacular victory, it seems sometimes, honestly, too good to believe. you think about it. Because of who Jesus is and what he has done, you have the gift of God's intimate presence with you.

[ 21 : 42 ] You have the gift of God's absolute acceptance of you. You have the gift of God's Holy Spirit in you.

You have the gift of a new heart. You have the gift of new relationships. You have the gift of a new family and a new purpose in that family.

You get to participate in what God is doing to reconcile and renew this beautiful but broken world. One day, this world will be set right.

It will be completely new and there will be no more tears because evil the forces of evil will be fully and finally conquered.

So because the child was born, because Jesus has been given to us, darkness does not have the last word. You can know light in the darkness and gloom does not have the last word.

[ 22 : 53 ] You can know real joy in the midst of your sadness. But then let's move on. Because this child has been born, we can know freedom and oppression.

Look at verse 4. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you, God, have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Do you know, in the ancient Near East, I find this so fascinating, yokes were not just worn by animals. They weren't just placed around the neck of an oxen or a donkey.

They were placed around the necks. They were placed on the shoulders of human beings. Prisoners, slaves, captives would be forced by a yoke to carry heavy burdens.

So really, a yoke is just simply a metaphor for oppression. It's just a symbol of oppression. The kind of oppression that the people of Israel experienced centuries before Isaiah spoke these words.

[ 24 : 05 ] When the armies of Midian, like a swarm of locusts, invaded their land and devoured their nation. And they cried out to God for help.

And if you know the story in Judges, God answered. He helped them. And with God fighting for them, Israel's embarrassingly small force of just 300 soldiers somehow managed to defeat the swarming masses of Midian's much greater army.

And I guess the question that I think we're compelled to ask when we listen to this passage is, what enemy army, what occupying force is oppressing you at the moment?

It may not be a superpower like Assyria or Midian or Russia, but it's just as powerful.

It's just as oppressive. Is it addiction? Is it pornography?

[ 25 : 14 ] perfectionism? Are you consumed by your study or consumed by your work?

Is it self-hatred? Are you gripped by bitterness, unforgiveness? selfishness? Maybe it's selfishness.

Maybe, in Martin Luther's memorable phrase, you are curved in on yourself. Maybe it's crippling guilt that you just can't shake.

Maybe you've been walking with Jesus for many, many years, but you're still laboring under a power that has been oppressing you for years. And the yoke's been on you for so long that it's worn calluses on your shoulders, and you wonder whether you will ever be free of this power that's controlling you and strangling you.

Well, listen, listen to the word of God in Isaiah 9. Because this child has been born, because Jesus has been given, oppression does not have to have the last word.

[ 26 : 49 ] Whether it's chemical, or emotional, or psychological, or physical, or political, or spiritual, oppression does not have the last word.

Jesus is an everlasting father, we read here. He's filled with compassion. He's filled with faithfulness. And he can free you in surprising and unexpected ways.

I know this. I've experienced this. because the child has been born, we can know light and darkness, we can know joy and gloom, and we can know freedom and oppression.

But finally, we're nearly done. Some of you over there look like you're about to drift off, so come back, come back to me. Finally, if you hear the word of God to you and he's speaking, you can know peace in the midst of strife.

Look at verse five. Every warrior's boot used in battle, every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

[ 28 : 10 ] This is an image, this is a picture of peace where the weapons of warfare are destroyed. It's a promise of peace. A promise that our nation desperately needs to hear.

Listen to this. A few months ago, I received a letter from the Shine Foundation, which is an organisation working with the victims of domestic violence.

Listen to this. You've probably heard of it before, but New Zealand has still the highest rate, the worst rate of domestic violence in the developed world, for some reason.

Did you know that in New Zealand, on average, police respond to a call in regards to domestic violence, someone desperately calling for help because they are about to be assaulted or they are in the process of being assaulted.

They get a call every five minutes. And it gets worse, police advise us that they estimate 80% of domestic violence incidents go unreported to the police.

[ 29 : 35 ] Do you know that one in three Kiwi women, it's estimated, one in three Kiwi women, at some point in their lifetime, will experience sexual or physical violence at the hands of their partner, the person they have loved and trusted, one in three.

There are many Kiwi homes tonight, tonight, filled with violence, filled with fear, there are many Kiwi hearts tonight, that are desperate for peace, that desperately crying out for peace.

Where do you need peace? Is it at home? Do you need peace at home? Maybe with a loved one?

maybe it's at school with some friends or maybe with some people who you thought were your friends? Is it at work with a colleague?

Because this child has been born, this promise is fulfilled, you can know peace in the midst of strife.

[ 31 : 12 ] You can. Yes, darkness is strong, let's admit it, darkness is strong, but Jesus, our light, he's stronger.

And yes, sorrow is strong, but Jesus, our joy is stronger. And yes, oppression is strong, it is, but Jesus, our freedom is stronger.

And yes, hostility and discord and hatred and injustice, they are strong, but Jesus, our peace is stronger still. And you're looking at me, and I can see your faces this time, you're not wearing masks, and you don't look as though you believe this to be true.

You really don't. And I wonder if it's because you're asking a question right now. You've maybe been asking this question for much of this evening as I've started speaking. You're thinking, hang on a minute, John, if this child has been born, Jesus, 2,000 years ago, if this child promised in Isaiah 9 has been given, then if this promise has been fulfilled, why does darkness still hang over this world?

Why does gloom still engulf my soul? Why does the grip of addiction and oppression tighten its grip, if anything?

[ 32 : 45 ] Why is there still so much injustice? Why? Why is there so much war and injustice in our world today? Why?

Like, if you've got half a brain, you'll be asking that question. well, the light and the joy and the freedom and the peace of Jesus, they're experienced whenever and wherever he's allowed in, where he's invited to work, where, as Isaiah says, the government rests on his shoulders.

darkness, the darkness and the gloom and the bondage and the strife of our time, they do not declare that the sun hasn't been given, they simply declare that the sun has not been given full access.

this text that we have read from Isaiah 9, it's often read at Christmas time, isn't it?

And for good reason, because it points to Jesus, the one who was born at Christmas. Do you know the Christmas carol that goes, has the line, joy to the world, joy to the world, the Lord has come, the sun has been born, this child has been given, joy to the world, the Lord has come, what's the next line?

[ 34 : 16 ] Let earth receive her king and every heart prepare him room. Has earth received her king?

Has every heart prepared him room? Has every heart in this room prepared him room? It's wherever and whenever Jesus the child is allowed in that Isaiah says darkness will be pierced by light and sorrow will be lifted by joy and oppression broken by freedom and war overwhelmed by peace.

So hear the word of God through the prophet Isaiah the child has been born the son has been given and this promise these four promises they have been fulfilled so invite him in give him access to the situation fear he's come he's here give him room amen can we pray let's pray holy spirit we thank you for causing these words to be spoken your word to your people all those centuries ago and we thank you for causing these words to be preserved so that today this evening we could hear them here right now and as we reflect on these words as we finish our time of worship together as we come to your table we ask that you would help us to experience the reality to which these words point in a way like never before so come keep speaking give us the grace to receive the son amen