

Darkness and Light

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[0 : 00] Now, in our Bible reading, we're coming back to our studies in Isaiah, and we come to chapter 8, verse 11, on page 572.

We're going to read from chapter 8, verse 11, to chapter 9, verse 7. The first part of this passage is one of the least known passages in the book of Isaiah, whereas the second is probably one of the best known, if not the best known, but they very clearly belong together.

So, Isaiah chapter 8, verse 11, on page 572. And Isaiah writes, For the Lord spoke thus to me, with a strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling, to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken. They shall be snared and taken. Bind up the testimony. Seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.

[1 : 40] Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. And when they say to you, inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God?

Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony. And if they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

They will pass through the land greatly distressed and hungry. When they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upwards.

And they will look to the earth, but behold the stress and darkness, a gloom of anguish, and they will be thrust into thick darkness. But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.

In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun, the land of Naphtali. But in the later time, he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

[2 : 50] The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone. You have multiplied the nation.

You have increased its joy. It rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest. As they are glad when they divide the spoil, for the yoke of his burden, the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For every boot of the trampling warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire. 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 to uphold it, with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth, and forevermore, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

[4 : 06] Now, you don't need to turn this up. I want to read just a few verses from Matthew, chapter 4. Matthew says, Jesus left Nazareth and went and lived in Capernaum by the sea in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.

So that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light.

And for them dwelling in the shadow, the region and shadow of death, on them has light dawned. From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Now, before we look at the passage, which, let me remind you, is on page 875, sorry, 572, let's have a moment of prayer.

Father, we thank you. You have given to us your word, a light shining in a dark place, the word of the apostles and the prophets, to keep us on our way and to guide us safe to glory.

[5 : 32] And we pray, Lord, that as we draw near to you, you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your words to our hearts and minds, and that you will open our hearts and minds to your word.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. This is a beautiful world we live in. There are tragedies and disasters, like the dreadful earthquake in central Italy. But it still shows the marks of a good and loving creator.

And one of the great beauties, I always think, in creation, and indeed in life in general, is the beauty of contrast. The other morning, as I was walking down the hill to get a train, it was one of those days you occasionally get, even in this part of the world, a bright sunny morning, the world was bathed in the light of the sun.

But yet, as I looked up into the sky, I saw there the pale shadow of the moon, the half moon. And I rejoiced at that sight. The beautiful contrast, the sun rising, and the moon still in heaven.

[6 : 58] I thought, this is one of the signs that God loves his creation, doesn't it? It's not just functional, it's not just utilitarian, it's beautiful, and something that we can worship him for.

Or if you go, say, to a jewelers, and a precious gem, a sparkling gem, the beauty is brought out by being placed on a dark background.

And this is very much our passage today. We have the dark background in chapter 8, verses 11 to 22, and then the contrast of the light, the shining light, in chapter 9, verses 1 to 7.

Isaiah is conscious that the darkness is falling on his people. The people of Israel, the northern kingdom, are about to be swallowed up by Assyria.

He knows that his own people, the people of Judah, doesn't know how long it will be. It's actually over a hundred years later. Isaiah didn't know that, but he knew that they were going to be taken off into exile in Babylon.

[8 : 05] And inevitably, he is crushed by this darkness and feels very often extremely oppressed. But in the darkness, there develops the idea of the faithful remnant.

We've seen this already, and we're going to see it as we continue through the book. For example, in chapter 8, verse 16, bind up the testimony, seal the teaching.

Among my disciples, that is, the people who probably went about with Isaiah recorded what he said, and so on, rather as in later years, in the gospel writers, would record the things that Jesus said.

And we know now, that was very common in the ancient world. Instead of a teacher coming into a building and teaching pupils or disciples, they would travel around with him.

Indeed, it happened in this culture right up to about the Middle Ages, certainly. So, these people are writing this to preserve the message. But in particular, this section, which began with Emmanuel in chapter 7, there's the idea of children.

[9 : 14] God sending children who represent hope for the future. Isaiah's own children are part of it. We'll see that.

We'll see that shortly. Isaiah has two children with the kind of names which you might well not want to give to your own children. Shi'ar Yashub and Maharshalal Hashbaz.

You might want to look elsewhere if you wanted names for your children. These are symbolic names. And this culminates, of course, on the child with four names in chapter 9.

And the contrast is nothing less than death and life, darkness and light in particular. And the section we read falls into two natural divisions, two contrasting divisions.

First of all, there is darkness which leads to death. This is chapter 8, verses 11 to 22. And notice, this is not Isaiah, being kind of political or social commentator, looking around and talking about the situation.

[10 : 22] He does, of course, comment on the situation. He's a very shrewd observer of the situation. This is direct revelation. The Lord spoke to me thus, with his strong hand upon me.

Now that is particularly emphatic. The prophets all claim the Lord spoke to them and through them. But this phrase, his strong hand upon me, suggests something much more physical.

Obviously, the Lord took me in his arms and he said this to me. Prophet Ezekiel also says this later on. And so this is a call, a direct, personal call from the Lord to Isaiah.

But it's not just for Isaiah. It's for us as well. And in these verses, 11 to 22, he gives us, feel like, an anatomy of darkness. What happens to people who live in darkness and in the shadow of death? How is this shown? And the first thing he said is, don't be bullied by public opinion. That is one way to live in darkness if we simply succumb to public opinion.

[11:29] Simply be browbeaten into accepting what the world regards as acceptable. In verse 11 again, do not walk in the way of this people.

Now, way in the Bible tends to mean a whole lifestyle, a whole attitude, emphases. Similar to what Paul says in Romans 12, a better known passage, don't be conformed to the world.

The translator J.B. Phillips puts that very helpfully, don't let the world squeeze you into its mold.

That's what Isaiah is saying here. Be distinctive. Don't just be an anemic echo of society.

So often people say, we have to change our mind because society has changed. Now, of course, I'm talking about basic doctrines. I'm not talking about secondary issues and opinions.

What I'm talking about is the basic truths of the faith, the basic truths of the gospel, the basic truths of the Bible. Now, verse 12, he lists, do not call conspiracy all that its people calls conspiracy.

[12:40] Rather difficult verse, but I think you can understand it against the background of the time. At the beginning of this section, in chapter 7, Isaiah had confronted the godless king Ahaz and said, if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand firm at all.

Ahaz had rejected that way and conspiracy can also mean alliance. Do not call an alliance. All that this people calls an alliance. Ahaz had made an alliance with the king of Assyria, rather like the cat making an alliance with the mouse.

And this was to prove disastrous to the kingdom. So what he's saying is, because King Ahaz has decided that he is going to make an alliance with the king of Assyria, that's not the way to go.

The way to go is the lord of hosts, him you shall honor. The three is the lord of hosts, the lord of armies. In Isaiah's great vision in chapter 6, the lord of hosts.

The hosts are, first of all, the heavenly hosts, the angels, the sons of God, the armies of God. They can also mean the steady host, the stars in heaven, and they can on occasion, as in the David and Goliath story, mean the armies of Israel.

[14:06] What Isaiah is saying is, this alliance seemed politically sensible, but it's actually crazy. And it's going to lead to death, it's going to lead to darkness.

It seemed politically subtle. If you're under threat by a gang, you make an alliance with the biggest gang leader of all. What Isaiah is saying, don't give in to bullies, whether these bullies or individuals or public opinion.

Trust the lord, the holy one, he is holy. Remember, that's Isaiah's great vision. Holy, holy, holy is the lord of hosts. Trusting in public opinion, trusting in the rewriting of the gospel, many people seem so fond of nowadays, is not the way to light, it's the way to darkness.

It will lead to death. And it did lead to death for both Israel and later Judah, because they failed to trust in the lord. They failed to trust in the lord of armies and trusted instead in their own strength.

Don't be bullied by public opinion. But then he says in verses 16 to 18, do trust God's word. Don't be bullied. How are we going to escape the pressure of public opinion?

[15:28] We're going to do it by trusting in God's word. Fascinating little glimpse, probably, into how the book of Isaiah came to us. Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples.

Bind and seal. In other words, what is being said here is not to be tampered with. It's not to be added to. It's not to be subtracted from. And later on, that's going to be said about the whole Bible and the book of Revelation.

This is God's authoritative word. We mustn't add to it. We mustn't subtract to it. And every error that's ever happened has either been an adding to or a subtracting from the word of God.

An adding to the word of God, which is the characteristic way of legalism. A whole set of rules and regulations that have nothing to do with the word of God or have anything to do with secondary issues and opinions or else a subtracting from the word of God, which is the characteristic way of liberalism.

So the disciples collect these sayings and probably after his death, they compile the book of Isaiah. As I said at the beginning, I believe this whole book comes from Isaiah the prophet.

[16:39] Probably chapters 40 are his own writings when he was in kind of a retirement during the terrible reign of King Manasseh. But anyway, probably the whole thing brought together by the disciples, as I say, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John bring together the sayings of Jesus.

And we know that Jeremiah had a scribe called Baruch who probably did the same thing. My disciples. Whose disciples? Now remember who's speaking this.

Isaiah isn't saying these are my disciples. These are the Lord's disciples. That's important to remember. I'm always worried when I hear ministers talking about my people. Not my people. They're the Lord's people. Ministers are under-shepherds. The Lord's people are the Lord's people. These disciples, while they're totally loyal to Isaiah, preserve his words, are ultimately the Lord's disciples.

And you can see how relevant that is to us. What would we know about these words if the disciples hadn't actually carried out what Isaiah asked them to do?

[17:50] It's a great gift of God's grace that we have the Bible, isn't it? I wonder if we think about it often enough in that way. How do we know what God wanted of us?

How do we know who God was? How do we know what he has done in the past, what he's doing now? Because next week, we're going particularly to look at making sense of history and what God is doing.

How do we know if we didn't have the Bible? It would simply be vague traditions, half vague memories.

It wouldn't be long before the remembered Christ became the imagined Christ. Because if we ignore the Bible, we're going to fill the void with our own speculations, aren't we?

We're going to project our own fantasies, our own fears, our own hopes, our own expectations. And that's why it's a great gift of God's grace.

[18:48] And we need to thank God for it, for giving us his word, giving it to us so fully and faithfully. And 2 Peter talks about the word which is the light shining in a dark place.

The word of the prophets, the Old Testament, the word of the apostles, the New Testament, and this allows each generation to be able to wait and hope.

As Isaiah says in the great fourth chapter, those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. And of course, one of the main ways in which we wait upon the Lord is by listening to his voice, listening to his word, a light shining in a dark place.

The word that's used there in Peter for dark actually means murky, misty, cloudy. And this trust is for the strength in verse 18. Behold I and the children the Lord has given me.

As I said, these children are Isaiah's own children, the child who is called Emmanuel, and the child with four names we'll come to in some moments.

[19:56] They're a sign that God is still at work in the nation. Now, we don't sentimentalize this of course, but too often it's said at Christmas, Christmas is about children.

Now, when we say that kind of thing, we forget that everybody was once a child. Hitler was once a child. I mean, we've got to not sentimentalize, nevertheless, the gift of children is a great gift and hope for the future.

Is it not? And that's why Isaiah says, the Lord of hosts who dwells on Mount Zion. Zion may seem in a real mess. Zion is threatened.

And of course, it's not only, it's not only physical children, it's spiritual children as well. And it's wonderful to see God raising up in every new generation.

People like Rupert going to Edinburgh North and so on. Others here who have come through Corn Hill and elsewhere who are ministers God's word in various places and once again bringing the light to other generations.

[21:06] I and the children whom God has given me. God is still at work. We'll be in darkness if we follow public opinion simply.

But we'll walk in the light if we follow the revelation. And that's why Isaiah in the final part of this chapter said, don't trust in bogus revelation.

J.K. Chesterton says, when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in anything. Because humanity must have something or someone to believe in.

Look at Ecclesiastes says, God has put eternity in our hearts. We know however much we may pretend not to. We know that there is more to life than this world.

And we know there is something bigger than us. And tragically, many people turn to the occult, to superstition. When they say to you, inquire the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter, it was believed that when the dead communicated with the living, they spoke in bird-like chirping voices.

[22 : 17] Now, of course, an awful lot of this was pure charlatany. We know that very often what would happen is a priest who was a ventriloquist would make a voice appear to come from inside a tomb or somewhere like that.

And you notice the dead chirp and mutter and said, but the Lord speaks clearly. And surely, it is a great tragedy if people with the revelation of God in front of them turn to bogus revelation. And of course, it is a great problem, isn't it? Vulnerable people at a time of great grief are often exploited by charlatans. Oh, I can bring up the voice of your husband or your mother and so on. You know the way that spiritism acts. That of course ends in darkness and despair. There is no hope there. There is no help there. And of course, the other, I mean, it's not just the problem of deceit and charlatans.

Whenever this kind of thing is engaged in, Satan is always ready to exploit it, the darker side of the occult. But, Isaiah says, what will this lead to?

[23 : 34] Distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish that will be thrust into thick darkness. That's what the world is like without God, without his word, without the light shining.

Seeing this already at the end of chapter 5, darkness. Darkness covers the earth. And John tells us that people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

That's one side of the contrast, the dark back cloth. The darkness which leads to death. But now in chapter 9, the light which brings joy.

Now notice, all activity comes from God here. There will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. Now her who was in anguish are the people of God.

First of all, the nation of Israel. Zebulun, Naphtali, these are the lands of far north of the ancient kingdom of Israel. And these were the lands which first fell to Assyria.

[24 : 39] The Assyrian armies coming down from the Tigris, these were the first lands that were taken and indeed as began to happen in the reign of Ahaz and continued to happen until in the time of good king Hezekiah, the Assyrian armies were destroyed before Jerusalem.

Now, you see, you'll notice that it doesn't say in the former time the Assyrians brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. It says he did because, and we'll see this particularly next week, Assyria was only an instrument in the hands of God.

And notice, Galilee of the nations. And we read that great passage in Matthew chapter 4 where Jesus goes to Galilee preaching the kingdom, the gospel of the kingdom and Matthew says to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah.

And later on Isaiah is to say in chapter 60, nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising. I would think it's exciting at the beginning of the New Testament.

Matthew is often called the most Jewish of the gospels. To some extent that's true, but who are the first to come to the king of the Jews, the Gentiles, the wise men from the east, fulfilling that prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 60.

[26 : 03] What does Jesus say at the very end of the gospel? Go and make disciples of all nations. It's a universal gospel. You'll notice that, you'll notice in verse, the end of verse 1, these are past tenses, written about as if they had already happened.

happened. And of course, because God has decided they will happen, God has decreed they will happen, it's a certain as if they had already happened.

How is it going to happen? First of all, because God is the creator and the saviour. Now these are the big, big truths about God that run through the whole Bible.

And this is what everything else flows from. Great, great affirmation of Israel's faith in the Psalms. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Israel was surrounded by gods, but they were all man-made. They were all products of imagination. They were all confined to certain areas. The sea god, the god of the mountains, the god of the valleys, the god of love, the god of war, and so on.

[27 : 12] But this god made heaven and earth. And therefore, this god is going to bring the harvest. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

The old festivals of Israel, the Passover, the Feast of Wheats, all these festivals were anticipations of the new creation. And in chapter 55, Isaiah is going to invite people to come to the party.

All you who thirst, come and rejoice. And the final coming when all the seeds which have been planted are gathered into the harvest.

So he is the creator. How will he be able to, how can he create a new heaven and a new earth? Because he created the first heaven and the first earth.

Paul says in Romans, God is the one who speaks of things that are not, as though they are, and brings something out of nothing. But he is also the savior.

[28 : 11] The language here is the language of the exodus. The verse four, the yoke of his burden, the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor. These are words recalling the exodus, a rescue operation from slavery.

And in chapter 40, Isaiah, and following, Isaiah is to see the return from exile as the new exodus. God, as I say, at the heart of Israel's faith, is my help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

But the other great note that sounds for Israel's faith is the Lord our God rescued us from the land of Egypt, rescued us from Pharaoh, and brought us to the promised land.

And that's what the day of Midian is about. Story in Judges, six to eight of Gideon, who are told to do crazy things. After all, the ten thousand men reduced these to a measly three hundred.

And then, when you attack them, don't attack them with swords and spears. Take a jar, take a clay jar and put a torch in it, and then break the jars so the light shines out.

[29 : 22] Of course, this was, the Lord knew, although they didn't know, that this would cause chaos in the Midianite camp. The Midianites, we are told, had hundreds and thousands of camels.

What's that got to do with the story? The point is, the camels panicked, stampeded, and before Gideon's 300 ever got near them, they were fleeing in panic.

You see, like the Exodus, this is totally a work of God. Moses said, stand still, see the salvation of the Lord. And here, once again, in the day of Midian, Gideon stood still and saw the salvation of God.

And verse five, the end of war altogether, kind of thing that's been talked about already in chapter two, the destruction of military hardware, and the pointing to the day when peace will crown, as we sang, crown him the Lord of peace.

His kingdom is at hand. So, he's able to do this because he is the creator, because he made heaven and earth. He's able to do this because he's the saviour, not just the saviour of individuals, but the saviour of his people.

[30 : 36] And how will he do this? And we come to this glorious passage, the child with four names. Now, Isaiah had a child with four names, Maharshalel Hashbeth, which were names of judgment, names of terror.

But here, these are names of hope, names of joy, names of light. And by the way, there are four names. I know the older versions want to make it into five and make wonderful a name as well.

It won't work. The Hebrew literally says wonder of a counsellor. The two names go together.

Anyway, the child with four names, the climax of the use of children to show God's providence.

Please, as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. I thought perhaps Hart the Herald Angel Sing was maybe a wee bit out misplaced in August, so we're not having it, but no harm in quoting it. Jesus, our Emmanuel, the human and divine saviour. So let's look briefly at these names. He is the wonderful counsellor. Now in chapter 1, Isaiah promised such a counsellor.

[31 : 44] And the counsellor is the person who brings the wisdom of God. King David said at the end of his life, he who rules over people must be wise, ruling in the fear of God.

God. And in the New Testament, Christ is described as the wisdom of God. In other words, this government, this kingdom will be governed by the principles of wisdom, governed by the principles of fairness and justice.

He is also the mighty God, literally God the warrior. Now, some people want to water this down and say divine father. It won't do because later on in chapter 10, this is applied to Yahweh, to God himself.

How is he going to be able to do it? Because once again the God of the Exodus, God the warrior who rescued his people. So you see you've got the wisdom, we have the power.

Now, very often in human history we don't get these qualities together. You get somebody who would actually make a very good leader, but they don't have the power, they don't have the authority.

[32 : 57] You get somebody who's an atrociously bad leader, but they have authority, they have power, military, or otherwise. Here they're coming together, aren't they?

The everlasting father, human fatherhood is time limited, but here is one who will never fail, and obviously it's carrying on the idea of children, I and the children God has given me.

This father will keep on producing children. I think that's the point. He is the prince of peace. Now, peace is a positive word. It isn't just the absence of war.

It is the absence of war. But if you study the wars in history, look back at the 20th century and see the end of the first and second world wars, it's easier, often people say, to win the war than to win the peace.

peace. And very often peace settlements have in them the seeds of future wars. This is not just the end of war. This is harmony, fulfillment, and joy.

[34 : 03] The whole universe filled as God made it to be, the new heaven and the new earth where peace will reign.

And notice this is a dynamic thing. It's not a static thing, of the increase of his government and peace, until it fills the whole earth. You see, this is a universal gospel, but it's also a specific gospel, the throne of David.

This is what it centers around. Now, the throne of David, as I say, is occupied by the godless Ahaz, who looks like a shrewd politician, but in the event, he's not even good at that.

Not only is he not a man of faith, he's not even very good at politics. And this, of course, is pointing to the future. It's going to be partially shown in Isaiah's lifetime by King Hezekiah.

King Hezekiah Phil. It's interesting to read the Old Testament in that light. It's pages rustled with expectation. And I'm sure at least in every generation, there would be people who wondered if the serpent crusher had arrived.

[35 : 15] And we're going back right to the beginning, the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. And then Abraham is told that kings will come from you.

Then David is chosen. Could it be Noah? But he blew it, didn't he? Could it be Enoch? But anyway, he was taken to heaven. Could it be Abraham?

Abraham failed. Moses failed. David failed. All of them failed. And yet, all of them were genuine pictures of the kingdom. I think that is the important thing we must never forget.

That from time to time, particularly in the kingdom of David and his successors, there were snapshots, limited, partial, nevertheless snapshots of what the kingdom would be.

The son from David's line, we read at the beginning these great verses, Gabriel to Mary, he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. He will sit on the throne of his father David and of his kingdom.

[36 : 16] There will be no end. How is the zeal, the passionate commitment of the Lord of hosts will do this? This is going to happen.

And it's going to happen because the Lord of hosts is committed to it. Now, the fulfillment of that is future for us as well as for Isaiah.

We know that. The death blow was dealt to Satan at the first coming, but the battle still rages, the darkness still overshadows the earth.

But, just as he came the first time, in great humility, so he will come again in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, and then the prophecy of Isaiah will be seen for what it is.

Not a pipe dream, not a daydream, but a wonderful promise of the day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[37 : 19] Amen. Let's pray. Father, indeed, we pray that your kingdom will come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

It does not look like it at the moment, does not look like it in the world, so often does not look like it in our own fellowships and in our own heart. We do indeed pray that we may look to that day when Jesus will reign where the sun does its successive journeys run.

And we thank you for this hope in his name. Amen.