

Do not be Disappointed

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to God's Word, to our reading this morning, and to the prophet Isaiah, which you'll find more or less in the middle of your Bibles.

If you have one of our visitor's Bibles, I think it's page 573. Otherwise, we're reading near the beginning of the prophet Isaiah, after Psalms and Proverbs, before Jeremiah.

And we're going to read a very familiar passage, but perhaps not quite so familiar, the verses that lead in. So we're going to begin reading at Isaiah chapter 8 at verse 19.

Isaiah 8 at verse 19. 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 the testimony. If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

[1 : 09] They will pass through the land greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their King and their God and turn their faces upward.

And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the 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 and the land of Naphtali.

But in the latter time, he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has the light shined. You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy.

[2 : 10] They rejoice 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 in the tramping warrior, in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For unto 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. Amen.

[3 : 16] May God bless to us his word. Well, good morning, everybody.

We won't pray again since William has prayed and we've sung a good prayer together. But I do want to say a big thank you for your welcome. Thank you for lending your pastor more widely than the Tron.

You've been given, as you know, a fine leader. And it is a great blessing when he gets to move a little more widely and help others in wider work. Not least when he's come to visit us in Sydney, the local church and some of the Christian groups.

And he has been a tremendous help to us as to many others. So thank you for lending him. It's a little costly for you at the church, but it's good for the kingdom.

And thank you, too, for the stand you've taken. It rings around the churches all around the world and reminds us that there are more important things than secondary things.

[4 : 18] And that truth and gospel are really primary and priority. So thank you. We appreciate you. Now, my hope this morning is that these famous words from Isaiah chapter 8 and 9, the people who've walked in darkness have seen a great light, would be seen by you to be more than cheap

talk.

Look, my hope, my prayer is that you would feel, perhaps realize, again, that these words are very true, very wonderful and very essential.

Just before Christmas, I saw a cartoon in a magazine of a man talking to a lady at a party. And on his T-shirt were the words, Peace on earth, goodwill to all men.

And the caption underneath had him saying to the lady, I know it's silly, but it does make people laugh. It's quite a sting in that cartoon, isn't there? Quite a sting.

And because the world believes that the words of Christianity are empty, and because the world is very persuasive, causing the church sometimes to believe that these words are empty, I want us this morning to see that the world is mistaken and empty without the word of God, and that these words are true, and that we are made rich by the word of God.

[5 : 40] I think you do know what I'm talking about. You know what it's like where God's servant in scripture is speaking the word. Perhaps you think of Jeremiah or David the psalmist or Job, and everybody's carrying on around him as though he's talking complete rubbish.

Or perhaps you think of the pastor who's doing the same, or the faithful believer who's attempting to do the same to family and friends. And these people don't care what's being said, and they mock the message, and they seem to be getting on absolutely fine without the message.

And so you keep heading off to church, and you sing your songs about how God is full of power and full of love, and you begin to wonder whether this power and love has ever been so ineffective.

And we are infected easily, aren't we, by the unbelief of the world. So I want us to turn to Isaiah chapter 8 verse 19, and I want us to consider three things briefly.

The darkness that we are faced with outside us, and inside us, but the darkness that we're faced with. And then the disappointment which we may feel in the face of the word of God.

[6 : 51] And then the divine intervention which comes from God's Son. So first of all, the darkness, and I'm going to paraphrase the words which are in your ESV Bibles for you.

These are words that were written about 700 BC. They've been around for a long time. And basically the prophet says, look, when people recommend you go to a medium, or go to the occult, if people recommend that you get some message from the dark side, from the underworld, he says, would it not be better for you to consult God?

Would it not be better for you to go to his word? Would it not be better for you to go to the living God, and not go to dead people? And the reason he says this is because the people who suggest that you go to the underworld for your information are in the dark.

And things are going to just get darker. And he says in verse 21, soon there will be great anger. And there will be a cursing of God.

Not just an unbelief, but an anger towards God. And in the world, he says, there will be greater distress. And finally, and I presume he's talking about hell itself, complete darkness, utter darkness.

[8 : 14] So if you like the dark side, says the prophet, you must recognize that things will get darker. And if you turn away from the bright word of God, you must recognize that things cannot get brighter.

Now, is this not very relevant to us? It's not that we want to sort of point the finger. We know what our own hearts are like.

But is it not very relevant to us? I got a missionary prayer letter last night by email. And I was just looking at it. Some friends of ours who are working in Belgium. And he said, pray for us.

The work is small. He said, we're going on. We're teaching the word. We're training. But he said, most people are interested in Tai Chi, Qi Kong, martial arts, meditation. Is this not true for your country and mine?

That people are rejecting the very bright word of God as if it is evil. And then are interested in very dark paths as if they are bright.

[9 : 20] I don't know whether you have Halloween in this country. Do you have Halloween taken off in this place? I mean, I was a very groovy guy once.

But I feel like an old man in the face of Halloween. You know, I'm told that I'm to be sort of patient and kind and see it as just a bit of fun.

Not take things too seriously. You know, get a life. But the people around me in Sydney where we lived, I mean, they had severed heads on the fence posts. They had blood spattered around the walls and axes.

And huge spiders. And they're walking around little kids of two, three and four. Call me weird, but I would have thought this is fairly distressing. And then I was reading in your papers a review of a movie which is just out, nominated for 12 Oscars.

The lady who was reviewing it seemed to be a fairly sane lady. She said she would describe the movie as pain porn. And she said, please don't go.

[10:25] She said she walked out of the movie, passed the Salvation Army band, and felt the contrast of evil and hope. Now, of course, she'll be buried under dozens of reviews that will give it five stars.

And it'll probably go on to win many Oscars. But it is a symptom, isn't it? And then, as Isaiah says, comes the anger at God. Again, I was reading one of the journalists in one of your papers this week on Thursday, a half-page article.

He says, Scotland has sunk into, and listen, a contented and untroubled atheism. Therefore, Christian people, leave us alone. He went on to say, and I quote, Christianity is marked by nastiness, vulgarity, and sentimentality.

So go away. Leave us alone. And you begin to see that what Isaiah said 2,700 years ago about this split between the unbeliever and the believer, and lies and truth, and dark and light.

It's just happening, isn't it? And it's widening in front of us. And yet God blesses the community that heeds his word.

[11:42] This church is an oasis of his grace. It's not that we're great or good in your church or mine, but he is wise and kind.

I was reflecting on the divorce rate in our church over the last 26 years, and I guarantee that whereas the national average is 45, getting up to 50% divorce rate, I guarantee the divorce rate in the 25, 26 years of literally thousands of couples has been less than half a percent.

That's just the grace of God, isn't it? It's just the grace of God. And the community that despises his word, Isaiah says, gets darker.

And so my home city, whenever I wake up and the alarm clock radio comes on, the first thing almost every morning is new attacks in the city, and the addictions, and the suicides, and a whole new hostility to Jesus.

Not just an apathy, but a whole new hostility to Jesus. And I have to reflect on the fact that my city, perhaps your city as well, has a strange dislike for the finest person the world's ever seen.

[13:03] You've really got to scratch your head at that point, haven't you, and wonder whether we've really made a good decision as a city. And 2,700 years ago, Isaiah said, if you walk away from God's word, it will get darker, and if you walk in the way of God's word, it will get brighter.

Now, I wouldn't mind if the unbelievers, especially the journalists and the movers and shakers in Sydney, I wouldn't mind if they looked at the New Testament, found it wanting, argued their case and said, this is exactly the weakness of the New Testament argument.

This is why I'm not going down it. This is why I'm going down a completely different path. I suppose I wouldn't mind so much if they would at least bring out in the open what they found missing. But I find that even very intelligent people avoid the New Testament like the plague, avoid Jesus Christ like the plague in their arguments.

They take a caricature of Christianity that they've borrowed from somewhere. Certainly it's a Christianity without Christ, and then they reject that. Last year I set myself to read the book called Age of Nothing, which is put together by a Cambridge academic, where he's attempted to marshal all the best thinking of the atheists of the last few hundred years.

Since, as he said, there is no God, we must listen to what the atheists are saying about how we ought to be living. And so I read the book, you know, waiting for my canoe to be torpedoed, my Christian canoe, you know, ready to say, yes, they've got a point.

[14:35] And I got to the end of these 600 pages, and it was just tragic. I mean, you marshal the best things that the atheists are saying in this book, and it's live for the moment.

That's all you've got. Write a poem. Read a poem. Study a leaf on the ground. I kid you not, that's the conclusion of the book.

That's why I read the Koran, to see whether it was actually going to rattle my cage. But instead, if you've read it, you know it's a jumbled, hopeless collection of sayings.

And then you turn to the New Testament, it's like a beautiful symphony. It's like a treasure cave, Aladdin's treasure cave. So Isaiah says, there is great darkness in the road away from God's word.

Expect it. And there is great light in the way of God's word. Believe it. That's the darkness. Second, the disappointment.

[15:43] What I mean by disappointment is that I then turn to these verses in Isaiah chapter 9, and I'm in the face of gospel hardness all around me. And it's coming into my own head, and it's coming into my own heart, and it's coming into my own church.

And I'm beginning to absorb the unbelief of the world around me. And so I have this feeling, which is not a reality, but it is a feeling that perhaps God's promises may be weaker than they are.

So look at chapter 9, verse 1 with me, and you'll see that the prophet begins chapter 9, verse 1, by saying this, There'll be no more gloom for northern Israel.

Northern Israel, which was decimated first by the arrival of Assyria in 722 BC. Naphtali, Zebulun, that's what got the Assyrian army first.

It was decimated first. And Isaiah says, and the light will come first to the north. The light will not come to the south, not the Dead Sea.

[16:49] The light will come to the north, the Galilee Sea. And then comes Jesus, calling himself the light of the world, to Galilee.

So this is quite a prediction, isn't it? 700 years before Jesus, Isaiah says, the light will come to the north. And you know that predictions are very risky.

Think stock exchange. Think politics. Think knowing who is Australia's prime minister for 12 months. We change every year.

Think weather predictions. We have a big race in Sydney called the Melbourne Cup. It's on in November. And I decided this year to collect all the predictions of all the experts, just to see how they went.

Not a single person picked the winner. Nobody went near getting one, two, and three. Predictions are very risky, aren't they? And here is Isaiah with freakish predictions.

[17:48] Predicting that a virgin will conceive and have a son, and that he will live and minister in Galilee, and that he will be crucified, and that he will be raised. Freakish predictions.

But I'll tell you what my disappointments are with the words of Isaiah 9. And I want to mention these because they seem to be claiming more than they can promise, or are they claiming more than they can promise?

And the first one is in verse 2, which says that there will be a great light. There will be a great light. Now, I want to ask the question, have we ever really seen a great light in this world?

If we'd been there in the first century, would we have, by looking at Jesus, said there is a great light? I mean, Isaiah himself says that he had no beauty, no majesty.

He was unimpressive. And, you know, people didn't really take his miracles seriously. The miracles didn't save him from the crucifixion, did they?

[18:44] Or here we are in the 21st century. Has Christianity really removed the darkness? I mean, it's had 2,000 years to remove the darkness. Or would you not be a little fearful this morning that the darkness is about to remove Christianity?

Here's my second disappointment. It's in verse 3. Isaiah says there's going to be enormous joy. Enormous joy. It's going to be like the joy of a bumper harvest.

It's going to be like winning a battle and dividing the loot. That kind of heady excitement. And I wonder whether we see that joy today. I'm not talking about the ecstasy that can be worked by musicians and Christian gatherings.

I'm talking about Christians who are so deeply grateful and are so profoundly happy that nothing else really matters. And we can't fake that kind of joy, can we?

And for many of us, we can't even experience it. And then here's my third disappointment in verse 5. It says it's going to be the end of fighting. No more army boots. No more soldiers.

[19:52] No more war. We're going to say hello to peace. We're going to say hello to quiet. And I want to ask Isaiah whether he's exaggerating here. Whether there really has been a great light and a great joy.

And whether there has been great peace. If I might borrow a fairly blasphemous line from Woody Allen. He said, I wonder whether we need to say that God is an underachiever. It's a very blasphemous thing to say, isn't it?

You can only think like that if you fail to see the cosmos which is around. That's a reasonable achievement, isn't it? And especially the Christ who's come into the world. Not that he's God's

achievement, but he is God achieving.

I had the pleasure and the privilege of being with the pastors this week, Monday to Friday. And I was telling them that I have a little tract percolating in the back of my head. And it's basically come about because I was sitting with a guy once.

And he said to me, where's the evidence for Christianity? And I mumbled and stumbled some kind of answer. And I went back and I thought to myself, the evidence is excellent. I mean, you've got a creation outside you.

[20 : 57] You've got a conscience inside you. Christ has walked into the world. The calendar has been changed. The chapters are there in black and white. The churches are on many corners.

And the cemeteries are down the end saying, don't waste too much time. And so I have this little tract percolating in the back of my head, which is called Sail the Seven Seas to Eternal Life.

And it's true, isn't it? I mean, the creation tells us that we have a maker. And our conscience tells us that we probably have a judge. And Christ tells us that God is personal.

And the calendar tells us he's significant. And then the chapters tell us that he's relational. And the churches tell us that he's merciful and patient. And the cemeteries tell us that he's urgent.

And that leads to my third thing this morning, which is divine intervention. I want to suggest to you that the way to be saved from disappointment and many other dangers as well is to look at what God actually says.

[21 : 59] I mean, it's no good buying a new phone and hoping that it'll make your breakfast. You've got to really look at what it says it will do. And what does God say in these particular verses? And the first thing we need to grasp from these verses is the identity of the person who he's talking about.

In the famous words of verse 6, he says, You'll need to think about someone who will begin as a child and be a son and become a ruler.

That narrows it down significantly. And then, says the writer, you've got to think about somebody who can be attributed with these titles.

The first one is Wonderful Counselor. Who do you know who you could give the title Wonderful Counselor to? Is there somebody who's got perfect wisdom and will not be foolish and will not be dull?

Someone who we might say is even greater than Solomon. Who can answer every question, leaving the critics speechless and leaving the listeners in thrilled.

[23 : 09] And I think immediately of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Even when his enemies had days to think about the clever question that they would bring to him, he just turned the tables in a second.

And when he spoke to people who were deeply, deeply in need of some kind of comfort, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Neither do I condemn you.

Go and sin no more. Wonderful, wonderful counsel. And then, says Isaiah, he's also to receive the title of Mighty God. In other words, this person is going to have to have the power of God.

Perhaps we might say he will speak and solve problems. You know, he'll speak to a sinful man and say, you're forgiven, and he'll be forgiven. Or he'll speak to a possessed man and say, I want you to be free of the evil spirits, and he'll be free of the evil spirits.

Or he'll say to a dead man, come out of your grave, and he'll come out of his grave. And he'll cause a person like a disciple of, like Thomas, to go down on his knees and say, my Lord and my mighty God.

[24 : 18] And then Isaiah says, this person is going to be called everlasting father. Somehow this son is going to be like a father. And he's going to be a father forever.

And because even the best human fathers are faulty and frail, this one is going to have all the compassion and all the generosity and all the protection of a perfect father. And I think Jesus. I think of the way he welcomed people and provided for people and protected people and pardoned people. I'm not saying the son equals the father.

I'm just saying the son has all the greatness of a father. And then says Isaiah, this person, this light, this special person is going to be called Prince of Peace.

He's going to be the great bridge builder. He's not going to be ineffective. He's not sitting in heaven with his arms folded saying, let's see how you perform and I'll see whether I will accept you.

[25 : 17] No, he sees the barrier between us and himself, which has been made by our disobedience. Whether it's one disobedience or a thousand and one or a million and one. And he's seen it in our speech and he's seen it in our secret deeds.

And he's seen the defiance inside us, which says, you know, God, I'm in charge. And still he's come. And he's brought the possibility of being on good terms with God.

I don't know whether you have church signs outside your church. Some of them are dreadful, as you know. But one of the best I've ever seen said, Jesus Christ built a bridge from heaven to earth with two planks and three nails.

That's a great church sign, I think. And so we see who Jesus is here. He is colossal in power and colossal in kindness.

And the second thing we see, if you look at verse four, is we see his achievement. And Isaiah says, this achievement is going to be like the defeat of Midian. What are we talking about?

[26 : 20] The defeat of Midian. This is where God took a small army of 300 under Gideon and defeated tens of thousands. A small, defeated massive.

And so says Isaiah, there's going to be a defeat where someone who seems so small is going to defeat something so enormous. And verse four, in his achievement, he's going to shatter the yoke. He's going to shatter the bar. He's going to shatter the rod. And again, what's this all about? Well, dear friends, can I remind you this morning that we and all people are by nature slaves to our sinful self.

We're unable to change ourselves. We're unable to cancel the growing list of sins. And we're moving one day at a time to God's courtroom where we'll suddenly find ourselves face to face with him.

And he will have an unanswerable case against us. And you just think of your own words. Think of your own deeds. Think of your own failures. And you'll know this is true. And this person has come into the middle of this.

[27 : 30] This king, this savior has come. And he has arranged in his crucifixion a way of shattering the case against us. Absolutely shattering it. Lifting off the yoke.

Lifting off the bar. Lifting off the rod. Taking it all on himself. Lifting it completely off his people. And that means that you, the believer, can go forward every single day utterly safe in God's fellowship. Your feelings may be all over the place. Your performance may be all over the place. You're utterly safe day by day because of Christ. And you're ready to meet him, as Jude says, without fault and with great joy.

So friends, no wonder when you think about this and you put your mind to this and you realize who did it and you realize what he arranged, you begin to see that the great light is not a disappointment.

It's where sunset turns into sunrise. That's what Jesus does. He turns sunset into sunrise. The unbeliever, and I say this as carefully as I can, the unbeliever is experiencing life as bright as it's ever going to be.

[28 : 43] And the believer is experiencing life as dark as it's ever going to be. For the unbeliever, it just gets darker. For the believer, it just gets brighter because of Jesus.

It's not a disappointing light at all. And the great joy is not a disappointment. It's something incredible. It means that in time and space, I'm actually in a good relationship with God at his expense forever.

And the great peace is not a disappointment either, is it? Because it means that even through this world and through the grave and to the next, I'm at peace with him.

Experiencing often the peace in my heart. And Isaiah finishes in verse 7 by saying, this rule of this king is going to increase.

It's going to continue to increase. And he's going to sit on the throne. And he's going to establish and uphold his people with justice and righteousness forever.

[29 : 46] And he will do it. Now, if words have any meaning, these have got to be big words. If they have no meaning, well, let's just close the book and forget.

But if they have meaning at all, they're very, very precious, aren't they? Now, we know the world is very dark. It's a secular, hostile world that is going everywhere but towards Christ.

We know the church is reeling, feeling surrounded, tempted to doubt, tempted to be disappointed. You need to remember these mighty words and all the great words of scripture.

These words of Isaiah from chapter 8 and 9 have called out to the world for 2,700 years. They're bigger than any voice you'll hear in this city. They're bigger than any group that will gather for a protest.

These words are massive, global, timeless words. And everything changes when you know who Jesus Christ is.

[30 : 47] He's bigger than the creation. He's bigger than your enemies. He's bigger than your dangers. And when you know what he's done, he's provided salvation.

He's brought light and joy and peace. And in some measure, we feel it. And in increasing measure, we will feel it. And that's why I want to encourage you this morning to stay on the gospel train.

Because that train has been running for 4,000 years since Abraham. And you mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that your Christianity is some little aberration or a little blip on the time scale.

You've joined a very, very wonderful plan of God, which has been marching through the world and through time for 4,000 years. And it's nearly at its end. Let me finish with a couple of verses from Proverbs.

The writer of Proverbs says, The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness.

[31 : 50] They do not know over what they stumble. Stay on the gospel train, dear friends, and help people on the gospel train. Let's pray.

Our gracious God, we thank you for giving to us these words that are true and wonderful and essential. We pray that you would help us to be believers.

We pray that you would help us to be witnesses. We pray that you would help us to be joyful. We pray that you would help us to be fruitful. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen.