

Wonderful Counsellor: He Brings Permanent Leadership to All Mankind

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[0 : 00] They will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish, and gloom of 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 a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. You have multiplied the nation.

You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you. For the rod of his oppressor you have broken. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire.

[1 : 41] 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. Forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Well, in our Christmas services this year, we're going to focus on the question, really, that was asked in that carol that we've just been singing. What child is this?

[2 : 46] What child is this whose birth was met with angelic anthems? Whose birth is still celebrated all over the world today, thousands of years later.

If surveys are anything to go by, and it's always difficult to know, isn't it? But if they are, then we're told that vast numbers of people in our country know very little about the Christmas story at all.

And I suppose it's true that for most people, Christmas these days is little more than a midwinter holiday. A chance to have a little festive cheer in the middle of a very damp and wet Scottish December.

And it certainly is today, isn't it? But you know, nothing can be further from the truth. Because the real message of the Christian church to the world is nothing less than that the birth of Jesus Christ announces the certain beginning of true and permanent leadership for all mankind.

The only leadership, the only rule that can make this world truly great again. Because it can make the human heart really right again.

[4 : 03] Now that's a bold claim, but that is the message of the whole Bible. Promised by God from man's earliest days and fulfilled wonderfully in Jesus Christ.

In whom the eternal God took human flesh and came into this world to save it forever. If you read through Luke's gospel, and we have copies I think available if you'd like one to take away tonight.

You'll find that it begins with many faithful Israelites. One like the aged Simeon. And they're waiting, we're told, for the consolation of Israel.

They're waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ of God. They're waiting for the birth of one that prophets like Isaiah promised some 700 years before it happened, as we heard.

Now the 730s BC were pretty dark times for the world. I suppose rather like the 1930s were last century. One by one, countries surrounding Israel had fallen prey to the huge power of the

ascendant empire of the day.

[5 : 15] That's the Assyrian empire, which was famed for its military might and also for its merciless cruelty. And the little nation of Judah was utterly surrounded by enemies.

It was living in fear. Its news reports, if it had them, would have been full of reports of fevered diplomacy. Desperate efforts for some sort of a peace process that would end the threat and the terror.

It's rather remarkable, isn't it? It sounds very contemporary. And of course, that's because the world has changed very little in 27 centuries. Not in the Middle East, and actually not anywhere else.

And our news today is just as full of darkness. It's full of wars. It's full of terror. It's full of crises of one kind or another. Whether it's economic crises or social or military crises.

Whether we're talking about the domestic scene or the international scene. The world hasn't changed. Because, of course, human nature hasn't changed. The human heart is exactly the same today as it was in Isaiah's day.

[6 : 20] And so we also look out on a world. And behold distress and darkness and anguish. And, you know, if things get really bad.

Perhaps in the aftermath of a war or terror attack or something like that. Then, and often it's only then, isn't it? That people start to get a bit more religious. Have you noticed that?

Maybe you've done that yourself. Maybe some crisis erupts in your life. And you think to yourself, well, I'm at my wits end. What will I do? Maybe, well, maybe I'll try praying. You've never given God a thought otherwise.

But when things are really bleak. And you can't think how else you can possibly get any help. You say, well, maybe prayer to God is worth a shot. And that's often what people do, isn't it?

With God. I wonder how you'd feel about that, by the way, if you were God. Probably not very much, I wouldn't think, to be treated like that. Anyway, that was the situation in the 8th century BC.

[7 : 24] And the people in Judah were desperate. They were desperate. And they were desperate, therefore, for God to do something. And so they prayed. But God's answer rather wrong-footed them.

Because he didn't say, well, all right, I'll step in. I'll sort out your current political crisis. I'll stop the war. And I'll bring peace in your time. No, instead, he said something far, far more extraordinary. He said, I will step in. I will intervene in world affairs. But I'll do it in an ultimate way.

I will save you. But when I do, it won't just be to sort out a few local issues. It will be to sort out this whole universe once and for all eternally.

And so I promise I will send someone who will do exactly that. A child born to save the whole wide world. That was an extraordinary promise.

[8 : 29] That was the birth that old Simeon and others were waiting for. A child, as Isaiah had promised, who would be born of a virgin. Whoever heard of such a thing.

Whose name would be called Emmanuel. God with us. God become man. And that child, he promised, would be the ultimate king of the whole world.

Forever. His throne would restore the great throne of David. But forever. And he would come and he would establish justice and righteousness.

And restore the whole world from the disastrous government of man. And bring in instead his perfect government of peace that would know no end.

And when that old man Simeon saw this child, the infant Jesus. He knew. He knew that what God had promised had at last come.

[9 : 31] Now my eyes have seen your salvation. He said. I can depart this world in peace. But what does all that really mean?

What would this child be? What would he do to achieve all these things? Well, we get some very important clues in the name that we read about.

That they prophesied Isaiah said this child would be called by. Now, in the Bible, names are full of significance. They tell you an enormous amount about the bearer's identity.

About their true destiny. I suppose it's a little bit like maybe nicknames do for us today. You know, if you're called John or Bill or Mary or whatever. It may not tell you very much about your character.

But if all of your friends call you basher or psycho, well, it probably tells you something. If everyone you know calls you the ice maiden, that's fairly cutting, isn't it?

[10 : 31] Or smiler or whatever it is. And you see, in the Bible, names are full of deep significance like that. And the first name of this child that Isaiah calls him in Isaiah 9, verse 6, is this.

His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor. Wonderful Counselor. Now, what does that mean? What does it tell us about this child? How he'd be a savior to the world and to its people?

Now, you may be thinking, some of you may be thinking, well, it's obviously all about psychological wholeness. He'll help us to understand ourselves properly. To discover ourselves, to find inner peace and harmony.

That's what a counselor does. And, of course, counseling is certainly a growth industry today, isn't it? I read recently that in the 1960s, around 14% of Americans had received some sort of form of psychological counseling.

But today, it's over 80%. Isn't that striking? I mean, I know it's probably quite challenging to be an American, but even that's quite extraordinary, isn't it? 80%. It's not much different here in our country.

[11 : 37] Hundreds of thousands of registered counselors. I'm told 2 million counseling sessions go on every single month. So it seems that people love counseling. And you can choose any kind of approach of counseling you like.

And I bet if you look at it being advertised, every one of it will claim to be the way of wonderful counseling. The way of true mental health and wholeness and so on.

Now, you may be a fan of that kind of thing. Or you might be very skeptical of that kind of thing. You might be sitting there thinking, yeah, I know exactly what you're on about. This is just what I thought.

Christianity is just another form of psychological crutch for wounded people, for inadequate people. There's nothing at all to offer a sane and balanced person like me. But if that is what you're thinking, let me just be very plain, very clear.

That is absolutely nothing to do with any idea of what is being talked about here. Nothing whatsoever to do with what the prophet Isaiah is telling us about this coming child by calling him wonderful counselor.

[12 : 40] In fact, it's the exact opposite of all of that. Now, at best, of course, properly trained counseling and so on can help in different areas of life that we've got struggles with.

At best, it can certainly do that. At worst, of course, it can be ineffective. Perhaps it could even be harmful. And there's a danger, isn't there, of breeding that sort of therapy culture that makes normal life a kind of ailment that needs treating.

But that is not at all what Isaiah is talking about. What he's talking about here is turning us away from ourselves and away from what's inside, away from our feeble psyches, to look outside, to look outwards and upwards to God and to stand in awe of his marvelous acts because he and he alone is the one who really can, who does perform wonders in our lives and who does purpose wonderful things for our lives and also for the whole wide world.

There is very little hope. In fact, there's no hope at all, is there, in looking inside of ourselves for the solution to our problems. We know that if we're honest about ourselves.

My mother actually was a psychiatrist and she used to have a cartoon in the house and it was a favorite of hers and it was a picture of a patient on the psychiatrist's couch. And the doctor was saying to the patient, I'm afraid I have to tell you, your true inner self is exactly like your true outer self.

[14 : 15] And I think that's the truth, isn't it? If we're honest about ourselves, looking inside to find a better me is likely to be a rather disappointing exercise. There is very little hope, if any, for the human condition in looking inside ourselves, only in looking outside of ourselves.

And what we need is someone with a real power to give true and real leadership to our lives and true and real leadership to the whole human race.

to make human beings truly great again by making us truly whole again. But who can really do that? Who can promise that and deliver it? Well, politicians promise great things, don't they? And very occasionally, occasionally, there is a leader who can make a nation better and even great, maybe even great again.

Who knows? Time will tell on all such claims. But make humanity truly whole again. Make this whole world truly right again.

[15 : 30] Perhaps there are some billionaires who are deluded by their vast wealth into thinking that they can actually do that. But friends, at best, if they think that, they are deluded.

And at worst, they're probably demonic. In their hubris. And yet, that is exactly what Isaiah claims that this child will do.

He will give permanent leadership to all mankind. He will perform wonders. He will plan and purpose wonders for those who look to him in trusting faith, who let him lead their lives forever. Wonderful counselor really means wonder counselor. One who counsels or one who purposes wonders. The word wonder there is a noun.

It's not an adjective. And so what that phrase means is that this promised one will be the one who performs wonders wonders and who purposes wonders for his people.

[16 : 35] Let me take that first thing. He performs wonders. That's a word that's used so often in the Bible. Wonders. It means God's glorious saving wonders.

If you go back to early on in the Bible story, in the book of Exodus, you find God saying to Moses, I will stretch out my hand and I will strike Egypt with all the wonders I will do in it.

And after that, Pharaoh will let you go. And that's what happened. And on the other side of the Red Sea is that people were rejoicing with great joy at their salvation.

They sang, Who is like you, O Lord? Awesome in glorious deeds. Doing wonders. If you read the Psalms, you find they're full of praise and proclamation of the saving wonders of God.

Psalms, Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord. Psalm 78, We will tell the coming generations the glorious deeds of the Lord, the wonders that he has done.

[17 : 37] See, all through history, God has been a powerful leader to his people. And they can trust him and they can follow him. Not because he helps them find something inside themselves, but because he gives a real help, real salvation from outside us, from him, from the wonders that he performs for his people.

He's the true leader. He's the one who leads into the wonders of real salvation for human beings. And that's what Isaiah promised hundreds of years before the first Christmas.

He promised the birth of one who would be a wonder and who would perform the wonders of God himself. So that he'll be the true leader, the permanent, the present, the powerful leader for all who trust him, all who follow him in life.

And that's what it means, that his name will be called Wonderful. His wonders will fill us with wonder. With wonders that can really transform human life.

With wonders that can really transform this whole wide world. And you see, in the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, all that the prophets like Isaiah foretold at last was beginning to be fulfilled.

[18 : 57] Now is the moment. God in flesh appears down from the splendor of his throne sublime. High King of Ages, Lord of all the years, God everlasting stoops to space and time.

All that was promised now is brought to birth. In Jesus, our Savior, come at last to earth.

To his name shall be called Wonderful. His wonders will fill us with wonder. Wonders that can truly transform our lives.

And wonders that will truly transform this whole wide world. But what about that second word, counselor? Well, the point there is that these wonders of God belong not just to history, they're not just in the past, but they are also in the future.

And that's what makes the message so wonderful for us. He's the one who not only has done wonders, but he purposes wonders for his people both now and also forever.

[20 : 12] The word counsel, it means to plan, it means to purpose something. Again, it's the very opposite of any idea of non-directive counseling which just facilitates, which helps somebody find the answers themselves.

No, this is quite the opposite. Isaiah is crystal clear that God's counsel is God's plan, it's his purpose for the whole of history. And that's something that pervades the whole of his long prophecy.

God plans, God purposes, he counsels. And what he counsels, what he decrees can never, ever possibly fail. Just listen to a few more verses from Isaiah's prophecy a little later on in chapter 14. As the Lord of hosts has sworn, as I have planned, so shall it be. As I have counseled, so shall it stand.

You see? Or here, this is the purpose that is purposed. This is the counsel that is counseled concerning the whole earth. The Lord of hosts has counseled, and who will annul it?

[21 : 23] His hand is stretched out. Who will turn it back? You see, what God counsels, what God purposes, must, must stand, always.

And all the way through Isaiah's prophecy, even amid times of real darkness over the world, what he tells us is that God's plan and purpose, what God counsels, is wonders for his people. You are my God, I will praise your name, he sings, for you have done wonders, plans formed from of old, faithful, sure.

As the Lord said, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder. In that day, the deaf shall hear, and out of their gloom and darkness the blind will see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. And this child, says Isaiah, the one you wait for, the one you hope in, he will be the one who does all this, all this.

[22 : 45] He will be the wonder counselor. He will be the one who is planning something utterly wonderful, something filled with wonder for the whole world, something that will fill people with wonder at the marvelous plan and purpose of God that he will reveal fully, that he at last will bring to complete fulfillment for the world.

And that wonder is, if you read the later chapters of Isaiah's prophecy, he makes it so clear, it is nothing less than the recreation of this entire universe. universe. Yes, it's a promise of renewal for life, for your life, for my life, for your world, for my world, but it's far, far bigger than that. So much more. It is a promise of utter renewal, recreation of this whole soiled and sad and suffering world. A world that's so full of heartbreak, a world that's so full of despair, a world that is overshadowed for every single one of us, every one of us, by an ever-present shadow, the shadow of death itself.

And friends, we know, don't we, that Christmas is a time when that dark shadow hovers over us so very tangibly, because we can't help, can we, remembering, remembering the ones that will no longer be at the table of feasting with us this year, the aching void that that leaves in our hearts as we think of them.

So often the shadow of death casts its pall over our lives. But this child who is coming, says Isaiah, he counsels, he plans something truly wonderful for this broken world, this sin-sick world, this world of death.

[24 : 39] He'll be God's servant king. He'll come full of the spirit of God himself as Emmanuel, as God himself in the flesh to bring good news, to bring gospel.

Isaiah says that near the end of the prophecy, he says he comes to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, to grant those who mourn a crown of beauty for ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, glory, and a garment of praise, instead of a spirit of despair.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me to do this, says the servant of the Lord, the one who will be called the wonder counselor, the one who is promising and planning something utterly wonderful.

The Lord has anointed me to bring good news, he says. And the thing is, friends, that when the Lord Jesus Christ was born, all of that came to its glorious fulfillment.

One day, one day he stood in a synagogue in his local town in Galilee. He quoted those verses. He opened the Bible and read those verses from Isaiah. And he looked up and said, today, today, these scriptures have been fulfilled in your very hearing.

[26 : 07] no other religious leader in history has ever claimed that divine power.

And the people walking in darkness had seen a great light because at last God's wonder counselor had come to be the true leader of all mankind, a present leader, a permanent leader, to tend his flock like a shepherd, as Isaiah promised, to gather his lost sheep, to lead them into the wonders of his salvation.

And that's what old Simeon, that old man, recognized when he saw the infant Jesus. Now, Lord, he said, you're letting your servant depart in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, that you prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the nations, and a glory for your people Israel.

old Simeon recognized that now at last he knew God's powerful, permanent, and true leader was present in the world, and for the world, and for him personally, the one who could lead him as an old man, lead him through death with no fear, and into that glorious salvation of his kingdom peace. What child is this? He's the counselor, he's the one who plans, and purposes, and fulfills all the wonders of God's salvation for this world, for this world, and for you, for you.

[27 : 57] I don't know what you're looking for in life, I don't know where you think you can find it, whether you think you could find it through some human counselor, or whether you just think that's all a nonsense, I don't know, but I do know this, he who is planning something wonderful, God's wonder counselor, the Lord Jesus Christ, he has a plan and a purpose for your life, for your life, and that plan and that purpose is very simple, it's that you should submit to him as your true leader, as the present and the permanent leader and the Lord of your life, because he alone does wonders, he alone does the wonders you really need whether you know it or not, he is the one who can bring to you the forgiveness of your sins, he's the one who can bring to you liberation from your past, the past that God alone can lead you from, and will free you from forever, when you bow to him as Lord, that's God's wonderful counsel, that's his wonderful purpose for your life, but I have to be honest with you, I have to tell you, that's not a foregone conclusion, the tragedy of history so often was that even those who knew God's wonders still rejected him, Psalm 78 says, despite his wonders, they still did not believe, they still did not believe, it was no different in Jesus' day, Luke tells us that the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose, his counsel for themselves, the ones who thought themselves the most decent, the most moral, the most religious people of their day, but they rejected the wonders of Christ, Matthew's gospel puts it even more shockingly, when they saw the wonders he did, and the children shouting Hosanna, they were indignant, they scorned his wonders, and so Jesus turned his back and walked away from them, seems astonishing, doesn't it? and yet, again, it's no different today, why would you, why would you reject the wonderful promise of God for your life?

Why would anyone do that? And Jesus tells us, it's not because he isn't truly wonderful, it's because deep down every one of us is truly wicked.

[30 : 47] The light has come into the world, Jesus said, but people love the darkness rather than the light because? Because their deeds were evil. You see, in the end, Jesus says, what keeps people back from the wonders of his salvation is that there are things in our life that are so precious to us that we will not give them up.

We won't yield them to the permanent leadership, to the lordship of Jesus Christ. We want to keep them. I want to keep my beloved autonomy.

I want to keep doing things my way. I want to keep my love. I want to keep my desires that he says are wrong and I have to repent of. And on and on and on the list goes, doesn't it?

And so we keep them tight and we won't let them go. what a terrible price, says Jesus, to mean that you'll remain walking in darkness, not just in this world, but forever.

Friends, my plea to you this Christmas is don't let that be you. Don't despise the wonderful purpose, the wonderful counsel of God for you and for your life, which he's made known in the supreme light of Jesus Christ, his son.

[32 : 14] He alone is the wonder counselor. His true and permanent leadership calls you this Christmas, calls all of us. And he's saying still to everyone, everyone who will hear his call, heed him.

He says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. the light of eternal life.

That's his counsel and purpose for you this Christmas. Amen.