

The Light of Hope

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everybody. It is wonderful to celebrate Christmas with you and we're so glad that you have joined us this morning. If you are a regular watermarker, it's wonderful to worship Christ our King together on this Tuesday.

If you're a guest from out of town, welcome to this wonderful, crazy, busy city of ours. We hope you have a wonderful stay here and we're so glad that you've joined us. And maybe you're from Hong Kong but you don't normally worship with us.

It's great to have you with us this morning. Please make yourself feel right at home. For those of you that don't know me, my name is Kevin and I'm from South Africa. You might be able to tell that.

One of the things that's very obvious about South Africa is that we, or South Africans, no longer I, they live in the Southern Hemisphere. Right? That's pretty obvious.

But what that means is that I am quite, not very used to the idea of Christmas being in wintertime. For me, Christmas is spending time on the beach, T-shirt off, swimming costume on, a cool drink, sunglasses, outside definitely.

[1 : 1 3] This idea of a cold winter is new to me. Now, I was talking to a friend yesterday from Canada and she said, this isn't winter. Winter is shoveling snow and trying to see if the car will start, right?

But this idea of Christmas and winter is new to me. But that's unusual because even in South Africa, we have, when you think of Christmas, we think of things like snowflakes and reindeer and Father Christmas, Santa Claus and mulled wine and hot turkey, right?

Which is unusual because no one since South Africa has ever seen snow before. Well, not very many of us, anyway. And that's one of the things about Christmas. We have this idea of what Christmas is about.

It's about snowflakes and Santa Claus. It's about red hats and Christmas sweaters. Leo and Amy, I saw your Christmas sweater. It's about roast potatoes if you're from England.

It's about presents. It's about Christmas pudding. And yet the scriptures tell us that Christmas is far deeper, far richer, far more profound than any of these things.

[2 : 1 8] Here's another thing about Christmas that I sometimes struggle with. You know that song, Jingle Bells? Anyone know that song? Jingle Bells is kind of like reindeer in Africa. It doesn't really sit so well with me, right?

Remember how Jingle Bells goes. It goes, Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way. Oh, what fun it is to ride on a one-horse open sleigh. Hey, hey. And then there's a line that goes, Dashing through the snow on a one-horse open sleigh.

Through the fields we go, laughing all the way. Ha, ha, ha. There we go. Someone knows it, okay? The truth is that while Christmas is full of fun and festivities and laughter and fairy lights and food and family and anything else that starts with an F, the reality is that Christmas sometimes masks or it's like putting a band-aid over the difficulties and the harshness and the realities of life.

Just because Christmas is full of fun and festivities doesn't mean that life is always full of laughter and joy, is it? It's kind of like, you might know the story of the World War I Christmas truce.

What happened is World War I, 1914, Europe goes to war. And the German forces and the British forces are bunkered down on the western front.

[3 : 39] They've both dug their trenches. There's about 200 yards of no man's land between them. There's wire in between. And they're both in the trenches with their guns pointing at one another, taking aim at anybody that moves across the no man's land.

And then on the 24th of December, 1914, these soldiers, it's winter. They bunker down in their trenches. And one of the British soldiers hears a German soldier on the other side singing Silent Night.

It's all dead quiet. And just this lone voice, Silent Night, appears. And so he starts to join in. And these two enemy sides start to sing Silent Night, Holy Night together on Christmas Eve.

And then the next day, Christmas Day, they wake up. And one brave soldier decides he's going to risk it. And so he climbs out of the trench, not knowing whether he's going to take a bullet.

And he walks across no man's land to the other side. And one of the other soldiers sees this and he gets out of his trench and walks towards him. And now everyone's watching to see what's going to happen.

[4 : 48] And eventually from both sides, these soldiers climb out of the trenches and they meet each other in no man's land. And they shake hands with one another. They exchange gifts. They exchange souvenirs. They exchange snacks.

And in some places, they even played a game of football together on Christmas Day. But Christmas Day ended and they go back to the trenches and the war continues for another four years of these sides trying to take one another out.

Friends, sometimes Christmas can feel like that. A short truce. A short respite. This superficial joy and frivolity. But actually the reality of life was full of difficulties and harshness.

And the realities of life soon come flooding back. And the question is, is there any point? What's the point of all this joy and laughter and dashing through the snow? Ha, ha, ha, ha. When life can sometimes not be that easy.

In our passage of scripture we read this morning, we see such a case of life's difficulties. In Isaiah chapter 9, it starts off and it talks about this nation that has experienced gloom and anguish.

[5 : 52] And it says in verse 1, it says, In the former time, he, that's God, has brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. And so what's going on here is that Zebulun and Naphtali are two provinces in the north of Judah, the north of Israel.

And what's happened is that these two provinces are sandwiched between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. And around this time, Assyria is exerting its influence, its power.

There's a new king on the throne, Tiglath-Pileser. He wants to extend the Assyrian Empire from Nineveh all the way down to Egypt. And so his army is rolling through the Middle East, conquering nation after nation after nation.

And they come to Israel and the first place that they attack and conquer are these two provinces of Zebulun and Naphtali. And so these two provinces are soon going to become under the control of this ruthless foreign army, the Assyrian army.

Now I'm not sure how many of us have been conquered by invading armies or been taken captive by enemy forces. But all of us here have felt the harshness and the reality of the darkness of life crouching in on us.

[7 : 03] All of us know what it likes to feel pain, to feel anxiety coming our way, to suffer with illness and sickness. A friend of mine, Bernard here, recently highlighted this song to me.

Lady Gaga in her movie A Star is Born, she sings this song called Shallows. And she says this, Tell me something boy, aren't you tired of trying to fill that void?

Do you need something more? Isn't it hard trying to keep it so hardcore? Isn't it hard trying to keep up the pretense that you've got life together, when in reality you're falling apart? She says, And in all the good times I find myself longing for change.

And in the bad times I fear myself. What about another Hollywood actor, Ryan Reynolds, a famous actor who's got millions of followers, especially amongst the female variety.

And one journalist wrote this. He said, behind those charming, effortlessly laid-back vibes, Reynolds is battling the same type of darkness as 40 million adults in the United States.

[8 : 08] He says, I've always had anxiety, both the light-hearted kind, but I've also been to the depth of the darker end of the spectrum, which is not fun at all. How's his coping mechanism?

He says, I was partying. I tried just to make myself vanish in some kind of way, frequently waking up in the middle of the night feeling paralyzed with anxiety about the future. Friends, we've all been there, haven't we?

We've all tasted and felt the overwhelming, encroaching darkness. Maybe for some of us it's unrealized dreams and expectations we had of ourselves. We hope to make some kind of status, some accolade, some achievement.

And as the years roll on, it seems like that desire, that achievement is further and further away. For some of us, maybe it's the expectations that others put on us, our parents or our boss or maybe a child, friends or family, hoping we'll be somebody and we feel like we can never live up to the expectations.

For some of us it's crying out to be loved, crying out to be accepted, maybe to love and accept yourself. For some of us, maybe we live with a hidden secret, something that's happened in the past, something that's happened to you, something that you've done.

[9 : 17] And every time you feel like you're moving on and you're getting on with life, it rears its head and it reinserts itself into your life and you feel like, where is this thing ever going to end? Friends, maybe it's religion.

Maybe the church itself has hurt you. Maybe people have let you down, hurt you, disappointed you. And this was the case for Israel. Assyria is at the gates, war is imminent, dangers all around, hopelessness abounds and the future looks bleak.

Now when we go back and read Isaiah chapter 8, what we realize is that the Assyrian army, the darkness that they encountered, was actually just the consequence of a far deeper darkness that was in their hearts.

There was something going wrong. Israel had been invited to trust God and they said no thanks. They'd been invited to put their hope in the sovereign Lord and they decided not to, to trust themselves.

Israel had been invited to love God and to serve Him. And their hearts had been captured by another love. And so even though they were very religious and they did all the right things, they participated in the right actions, they went to church and they went to the temple, in their heart of hearts, they were actually loving, serving and trusting themselves.

[10 : 29] Friends, this is not just the story of ancient Israel 3,000 years ago. This is the story of humanity. This is the story of the world. This is the story of all of us, from Hong Kong to Vancouver, from South Africa to Mongolia, from Fiji Islands to the center of downtown London.

The story of the human race, of you and of me, is that we've gone our own way. We've decided to trust ourselves. We've loved ourselves. We've served ourselves, rather than our God and our Maker.

And the result is always anguish. It's crying out in confusion. Where is God? Where is some light? Where is the hope? Where is the peace? Where is the joy?

And it's into this context, that Isaiah gives this staggeringly wonderful good news. Because look at what he says. He says in verse 1, A story of joy.

A story of light that comes into the midst of the darkness. And so let's see what happens. Verse 2 says this, The people that were once in darkness have seen a great light.

[12 : 02] Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them a light has shone. Here is a nation that the enemy is at the gates, and things are not going well, and their hearts are consumed with things not going the way they want.

And yet it's like the clouds of darkness are starting to part away. It's like they've been walking through the night, and they see on the horizon, the sun is just starting to rise. The sun is starting to dawn.

But notice, it's not a light that is found within them. They didn't look inside of themselves. They didn't manufacture it. They didn't earn it. It's a light that has come to them.

But Isaiah continues to describe this feeling, that those who once knew darkness are now experiencing. He goes on in verse 3, he says that this, something is happening, sorry, something is happening to these people.

And it's like a light has come to darkness, but more than that, it's like a harvest, it's like a nation that experiences a bumper harvest. And it's like a nation that experiences an enemy attacking them, and they defeat the enemy, the enemy runs away, and they are rich with the spoils of war.

[13 : 07] Look at what verse 3 says. It says, You have increased our joy. They rejoice before you, as with the joy at harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoils.

Here is a nation that has become rich and abundant. The harvest is plentiful, the business deals have come in, they've exceeded their targets, and they are celebrating because their Christmas bonus is huge.

Here is a nation that is full of joy. But not only that, it's a joy which the nation is experiencing, like what happens when a country has been oppressed by war, and suddenly the enemy flees, and they are liberated, and they are free.

Look at what verse 4 says. It says, For the yoke of his burden, the rod of his oppressor, has been broken. Verse 5, Every boot of the trampling warrior, every garment rolled in blood, will be burnt as fuel for the fire.

What's going on here? When I finished high school, let me say this, as a high schooler, I was a terrible student. Very good thing I didn't grow up in Hong Kong, I would have brought a lot of shame to my family.

[14 : 12] I was a very, very bad student. And so the day I finished high school, we had a plot of land in South Africa, I built a big bonfire, and I threw all my textbooks, all my notebooks, no more calculus, no more anything, I want nothing to do with school.

I've made a mess of fire, and I've burnt all my school books. That's the end. I'm done with that. Look what's happening here in verse 5. These people have built a big bonfire, but they're not burning textbooks.

They're burning their army boots. They're burning their military uniform. They're taking off anything that sounds like war, and they're throwing in the fire. We are done with war. Here is a nation which has no more need of them.

The war is over. The army is disbanded. The soldiers have become civilians. The darkness has turned to light. Peace has come into their hearts, those who were once at war.

But we still don't know why. Why? What's brought about this light? What's brought about this peace? What's brought about this jubilation, and this joy, and this celebration?

[15 : 17] Well, verse 6 tells us. And the answer is because there's a new king in town. There's a new king that's arrived on the scene, a king so majestic and so authoritative.

Not only has he won the war, he's ended all conflict as well. Because this new king has arrived who brings light and life. But there's something very unusual about this king.

There's something unexpected. In fact, at first, it doesn't seem like this king possesses much authority. He seems too gentle. He seems too mild. He seems too tame to be a king that establishes authority and defeats the enemy.

But it's just an illusion. Because here is a king who is unlike any other. Both in his greatness and in his gentleness. Look at verse 6. For to us, a child has been born.

To us, a son has been given. And the government will be upon his shoulders. And his name will be called Wonderful Counselor. The Mighty God.

[16 : 20] The Everlasting Father. The Prince of Peace. And of the increase of his government and his rule and his reign, there will be no end. Ray Orton says it like this.

God's answer to everything that has ever terrorized us is a child. The power of God is so far superior to Assyria's and all the big shots of this world, that he can defeat them by coming as a mere child.

His answer to the bullies swaggering through history is not to become even a bigger bully. His answer is Jesus. You see, friends, in Matthew chapter 4, when Jesus comes and launches his ministry and his teaching properly, he comes to tell the world that I am the light that's come into the darkness.

Where does he go? Where does the Messiah, the Savior, that's come to bring healing and liberation go? Does he go to Rome, the center of the world's power? Does he go to Athens, the center of philosophy and thinking and scholarly debate?

Maybe he goes to Jerusalem, the center of Israel. No. Jesus goes to a town called Capernaum, a town in the province of Naphtali. Jesus goes to Nazareth, a town in the province of Zebulun.

[17 : 33] And to the very places that experience the trauma and the turmoil, to the very two provinces that were first attacked by the enemy and felt encroaching darkness, Jesus comes and says, those who have walked in darkness, a great light has shone upon them.

Because Christ the King is here. Friends, this is what Christmas is about. This is the grand announcement of Christmas, that in Jesus Christ, the baby from Bethlehem, came our liberator and our King.

Came a light into a lost world, to bring freedom and hope to those who are in anguish. And though he was just a child, though he came in the most unexpected way, though he came as a baby, born to an unwed teenage mom in the backwaters of Palestine, with sheep and oxen and shepherds as his very first followers, though his coming confused the elites and confounded the intellectuals, here was a King who came to push back darkness and to bring light and hope.

And so you may ask, what's so special about this child? Well, his name is Wonderful Counselor. Where all the sophistication and the brilliance and the academics and the intellectual advances of the world have left us more busy and more confused and more hurting than ever before, here is a Wonderful Counselor, whose wisdom is counterintuitive.

He says you've got to lay down your life to find life. He says you have to die to yourself in order to find life. You have to surrender and admit that you've broken in order to be healed. But here is a Wonderful Counselor, the Ancient of Days, the one whose counsel has stood the test of time.

[19 : 06] His name is that he's Mighty God. He's not just a King who's one of many gods. He's not just one of many options. Here is the one true God who comes full of grace, and yet one day he's coming to vanquish his enemies.

His name is the Everlasting Father. He's come to show us his fatherly love. He's come to love us endlessly, from everlasting to everlasting. Friends, so great is his fatherly love for us, that while we were lost in our sin, God sent his Son to come and die on the cross for us.

Friends, his name is Prince of Peace. Here is a King who brings lasting peace, not just on the earth, but in our hearts, in all the world. Later on, Isaiah would say this, that when the Prince of Peace comes, the lion will lie down with the lamb.

The wolf will become friends with the young goat. When the Prince comes, those that have been enemies since the beginning of time, those that have been at each other's necks and throats, and hated each other, and wanted to kill each other, these two will become friends and partners, because the Prince of Peace has come.

His name is Emmanuel, God with us. His name is Jesus, the Savior of the world. Friends, the good news of great joy, is that while we had hardened our hearts towards God, while we, like Israel, had gone our own way, in His great mercy and His great love, God had not hardened Himself towards us, but He loved us.

[20 : 35] He loved us enough to move heaven and earth to come to us. He loved us enough to rescue us from our sin and our situation. He loved us enough to move towards us and push back darkness.

He loved us enough to melt our hearts, to overcome our rebellion with His kindness, in order that we may come to Him, and know Him, and be loved by Him, and experience His grace, and experience His joy.

He came in order to invite us into His family, that we might be called children of God. Friends, how does He do this? Well, He does it by showing us what God is like.

He does it by showing us what kindness, and mercy, and justice, and grace, and tenderness, and holiness, and beauty look like. Jesus came to a world that was starved of grace, and He brought life-giving grace.

Jesus came to a world full of confusion and half-truths, and He brought truth that sets us free. Jesus came to show us what God is really like. He came by taking our darkness and shame, and nailing it to the cross.

[21 : 41] Only if Jesus can it be said He was born to die. From the wooden feeding trough, to a wooden executioner's cross, every bit of Jesus' life spoke about His end point being Calvary.

Jesus came to take our sin upon Himself, so that no longer would sin be our master, no longer would darkness be our accuser. It is His way of destroying the sin that dwelt in our hearts, without destroying us.

And so as the song says, Mild He lays His glory by. Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give us a second birth.

Friends, He comes by promising to come again. You may be here this morning and say, Kevin, all this talk of joy and light, it doesn't make sense to me. I've been a Christian, and my life has been marked by darkness, and I don't get all this stuff.

Alec Mottier said it like this, The darkness is true. But it's not the whole truth. And it's certainly not the most fundamental truth. The fundamental truth is that Jesus is coming again.

[22 : 44] And because of His promise that this Christmas He's coming again, He will come not merely to tweak history, or to make minor improvements. He won't come to slightly make that problem a little bit better, or to tweak that adjustment.

He will come to finally and fully derive out darkness, and bring His peace forever. His rule and His reign and His peace will last forever. Of the increase of His government, there will be no end.

Friends, all this is because Christ the King came. He came to bring us light. He came to bring us life. He came to bring us hope, and He came to bring us healing. And this is what Christmas is all about.

Friends, Christmas is far more than just jingle bells, and reindeer, and turkey, and mulled wine. Christmas is the story of rich hope. It's the story of deep, sustaining peace. It's the story of profound joy, because it's the story of the child that was born, that came to bring us peace.

Christmas is the story of Jesus. Let's pray together. O Christ, our Savior, God, this morning as we remember Your birth, we celebrate the light that has come.

[23 : 57] Jesus, we acknowledge that our world is full of darkness. We acknowledge that there's pain. We acknowledge even our own hearts, Lord God, as sometimes we go our own way. O Christ, won't You come not just into our world, won't You come into our hearts?

Won't You come, Savior, our King, and have Your rule and reign in our hearts? Jesus, come and have Your way. Lord, don't just come and bring peace to this world. Bring peace to our hearts, Lord God, we pray.

Come and be our Lord and Savior. In Your name we pray. Amen. Amen.