**CHRISTMAS MESSAGE**

**HOPE FOR A DIVINE KING**

**Isaiah 7:1-9:7**

**INTRODUCTION**

What do you feel when you start thinking about Christmas? Some of you feel excitement. You can’t wait to see family and friends at Christmas gatherings, or eat Christmas dinner, or enjoy all the sights and sounds of lights and carols. Others feel nostalgia. Perhaps you long for the days when Christmas was simpler, when there wasn’t so much commercialism attached to it, and it was more about the glorious mystery of Christ’s birth. Still others may feel sadness. Someone you love isn’t around anymore, or you’ve suffered the pain of family breakdown, or the friends you once thought you would celebrate Christmas with every year have forgotten you.

Christmas brings a huge range of emotions to us. We’re different people with different experiences. But if we study what the Bible says about Christmas, it quickly becomes clear that there is something that everyone should feel when it comes to Christmas, regardless of personality or experience, and it’s this: hope.

Biblically speaking, Christmas is about a lot of things. It’s about love. Joy. Generosity. But above all these things, it’s about hope. Hope that life won’t always be broken like it is now. Hope that suffering will one day end. Hope that God will restore what has been lost and make everything right again.

Christmas is about hope. It always has been. It’s been about hope since Jesus was born, and it was about hope before Jesus was born. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, God’s people looked forward to the birth of the divine king with eager anticipation, longing, and hope, because they knew that only he could restore their broken lives.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit that Christmas may mean a lot of things to us, but it’s rarely about hope. And if it’s not about hope, then we’ve missed the true meaning of Christmas. We can talk all we want about how Christmas isn’t about gifts but about God’s gift to us in the person of Jesus Christ, but if that truth doesn’t produce *hope* in us, then we’ve missed the whole point.

And so, what we are going to do is look to our Old Testament brothers and sisters to aid us. We’re going to try to put ourselves in their shoes in order to understand how they would have felt when Jesus’ birth was announced to them. To do that, we’re going to look at the well-known Christmas text from Isaiah 9. It’s a powerful text of Scripture and one of my favourites in the Old Testament. But in order to really feel its force, we’re going to spend some time studying the context, starting way back in Chapter 7. We’re obviously not going to have the time to look at every single detail in this large passage, but I hope that we will look at enough so that we will not only understand the hope that Israel had for the coming of the Christ, but feel it ourselves as well.

The title of this message is **Hope for a Divine King.** My aim today is to show you that **The Birth of Christ Strengthens Our Hope for Christ.**

We will have three points today:

1. The Heavenly Sign
2. The Faithful Remnant
3. The Divine King

(1) **THE HEAVENLY SIGN**

Isaiah begins describing the historical context in verse 1. Ahaz is the King of Judah. 2 Kings 16 tells us that he was twenty years old when he became king, and that he reigned for sixteen years. He was one of the descendants of David who did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He worshipped idols, made offerings to false gods, and even burned his sons as human sacrifices. He was a blatantly sinful king who led the people of Judah astray by leading them into the same corrupted worship that he practiced.

As a result, the Lord brought incredible hardship on Judah during Ahaz’s reign. Remember that, at the time, God’s people had been split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was known as the kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom was known as the kingdom of Judah. Both were descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were meant to be a single, united people ruled by a single king descended from David, but political division had fractured them into two kingdoms ruled by two different kings. Despite this division, Israel and Judah were largely able to get along and lived in peace with one another.

Sadly, that’s not the case here. Verse 1 tells us that Pekah the king of Israel had made an alliance with Rezin the king of Syria to wage war against Jerusalem. The Syrians weren’t part of God’s covenant people. They weren’t descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And yet, Israel preferred them over their own blood brothers in Judah. This was tragic. Half of God’s people were fighting against the other half of God’s people with the help of those who weren’t God’s people.

Ahaz is understandably shaken. Verse 2 says when he heard about this alliance between Syria and Ephraim (another name for Israel), “the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” The people of Judah had to face both the fear of being outnumbered two kingdoms to one as well as the pain of being betrayed by their Jewish brothers in Israel.

But in the midst of this fear and pain, the Lord has a word for them, which he will give to them in verses 4-9. God says, “Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands.” Yes, their anger will be fierce, but it will be brief. Their end is coming, and it’s coming soon.

That’s the message that God gave to Isaiah to deliver to Ahaz and the people of Judah, but notice what the Lord tells Isaiah to do in verse 3. He tells Isaiah to deliver this message along with his son, Shear-jashub. This is the first of two of Isaiah’s sons that we’re going to see in our passage, and their presence is very significant. Why? Neither of them do anything in our text. They don’t say anything either. The only thing they add to the narrative is their *name*. And what does Shear-jashub mean? *A remnant shall return*.

Shear-jashub was sent to Ahaz along with Isaiah to remind Judah that God would always preserve a remnant of his people. It didn’t matter if wars came upon them, or plagues afflicted them, or drought came upon their land. Even if they were forced to leave their homeland and live as exiles in foreign countries, God’s promise to them was that *a remnant shall return*.

In other words, Isaiah had two prophetic messages: the word that he spoke, and the word that he brought with him in the person of his son; or as Alec Motyer so wonderfully put it, “the word that became flesh”. He was God’s assurance to his people that he would always protect them and preserve them.

Isaiah’s word was also a warning. Verse 9 warns that, “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” God is saying, “Trust my promises. Trust *me*. If you don’t, then there will be devastating consequences.”

The Lord knows that faith isn’t easy, especially when Judah’s circumstances were so dire, so the Lord invites Ahaz in verse 10 to ask for a sign. It could be anything. It could “be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” Whatever Ahaz needed to strengthen his faith, God would give it to him. But in verse 12, Ahaz declines the invitation, saying “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.”

Sounds pious doesn’t it? Sounds like Ahaz is doing the right thing by not testing God, doesn’t it? After all, didn’t God say to Israel in Deuteronomy 6 “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test”? Yes it does, but there’s a difference between testing God because *you* don’t trust his promises, and testing God because *he* wants to strengthen your faith. God has invited Ahaz to test him. God wants to strengthen his faith. But Ahaz didn’t want it.

Why not? Isaiah doesn’t tell us, but 2 Kings 16 does. Ahaz had already turned his back on God by making an alliance with the King of Assyria. He didn’t want God’s help. He wanted a foreign king’s help. This is what 2 Kings 16:7-9 says:

“So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.’ Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasures of the king’s house and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him.”

Ahaz had betrayed God just as Israel had betrayed him. He chose to trust in man rather than the Lord his God for his deliverance.

How would the Lord respond? Would he wipe Ahaz and the people of Judah out? Would he abandon them? No, he wouldn’t. He will keep his covenant with his people, because even when they are faithless, he remains faithful. That’s why Ahaz’s unbelief sets the stage for one of the most precious promises of the Messiah’s birth in verses 13-14: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Immanuel. God is *with us*. A virgin would miraculously conceive and bear not just a son, but a *divine* son. The presence of that child on earth would be the very presence of God himself, as God’s word that he would love and redeem his people took on flesh.

But Ahaz didn’t want a sign. He didn’t believe God’s promise, and that unbelief would come at a price. Verse 15 says that Immanuel “shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.” Curds and honey. That was the food of poverty. Remember, John the Baptist, who chose an austere lifestyle, ate locusts and wild honey.

In other words, Immanuel would be born at a time when the people of Judah lived in poverty. Why? Because of verse 17: “The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

This is so ironic. King Ahaz turned to Assyria, and now Assyria would turn on him. Assyria would do what Ahaz asked it to do. The Assyrians would kill Rezin of Syria and send Israel running back to Samaria with its tail between its legs. But when that was done, Assyria wouldn’t stop there. Its hunger for conquest wouldn’t be satisfied, and it would turn its attention to Judah next.

All this would happen according to God’s will. Judah chose Assyria over God, so God would send Assyria as his instrument to judge them. Such is the immensity and mystery of God’s sovereignty.

Isaiah describes the devastation that would follow in verses 18-25. The Assyrians would fill the land like flies (verses 18-19). They would take away the dignity of God’s people by shaving their heads and beards (verse 20). They would kill and take away so many people that one man would have a young cow and two sheep all for himself when that would typically be enough to feed multiple families (verses 21-22). And to cap it all off, God’s favour would be removed from the land, so that where there used to be a thousand vines, there would only be briers and thorns.

Yes, God would send a sign to his people, the sign of Immanuel – God with us – when the virgin conceived and gave birth, but before that happened, there would be judgment.

This alternating between hope and judgment continues in Chapter 8. Hope in verses 1-4 as another of God’s words becomes flesh. Isaiah and his wife would bear a son named “Maher-shalal-hash-baz”, which means “the spoil speeds, the prey hastens”, which communicates how quickly victory would come over Damascus and Samaria.

Hope turns back to judgment in verses 5-8 as the Lord says that Assyria would then turn to Judah like “the waters of the river, mighty and many…it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of (Immanuel’s land).”

The prophecy ends by turning once more to hope in verses 9-10. It’s a word about how God will judge the nations that are opposed to his people. He will break them and shatter them. They will take counsel together, but it will come to nothing, they will speak a word, but it will not stand. Why? Because *Immanuel*. *God is with us*. Immanuel would come and bring an end not only to Assyria’s reign of terror, but to all nations that are opposed to God’s people. He would be the final Word who became flesh, God’s sign to his people in the person of Jesus Christ that he would protect and preserve them forever.

(2) **THE FAITHFUL REMNANT**

That’s the conclusion of the prophetic word Isaiah had for Ahaz and for Judah. Now, in the midst of Judah’s unfaithfulness, Isaiah writes down the personal word that God gave to him and to his disciples in verses 11-22, leading to our second point: The Faithful Remnant.

Isaiah already told us that, when Ahaz and his people heard about the alliance between Syria and Israel, their hearts “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” They were terrified. But that wasn’t true of Isaiah. Isaiah describes his response to the coming judgment in verse 17: “I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.”

Isaiah wasn’t afraid, even though judgment was coming on his people. War, famine, and poverty would soon cover his beloved land, but he wasn’t afraid. How was that possible? Isaiah tells us in verse 11: “For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me”. One commentator put it this way:

“Isaiah explains how he attained an unshakeable peace, while the court and the people are seized by profound emotion. It was not…the consequence of a better political insight or a more robust nature but of divine inspiration.” – Otto Kaiser

Isaiah’s courage came from an encounter with the Lord. God met with him and spoke to him with a “strong hand” upon him, and Isaiah believed God’s Word. He heeded God’s warnings and trusted God’s promises, so that even though his whole world was about to fall apart, he could say, “I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.”

What was it that God said to him? Verse 12: “Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honour as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.” God said to Isaiah, “Don’t fear man. Fear me, because I am the one who holds all people in my sovereign hand.” The only reason why people fear man is because they have stopped fearing God. They have come to believe that people are in control, not God, and that their lives are in the hands of merciless men rather than a merciful God. But God says that’s not true. He is in control, not man. Our lives are in his hands, and therefore anything that happens to us will only be because of God’s sovereign will.

If you fear God rather than man, there’s a promise for you in verse 14: “he will become a sanctuary”. “Sanctuary” was one of the names used for both the Temple and the Tabernacle, the place where God’s holy presence rested. It was where God revealed the light of his glory and where he spoke to his people. God promises to Isaiah and to anyone who fears him that if you fear him rather than man, “he will become a sanctuary” to you. His holy presence will rest on you and fill your life with his glory.

But for those who do not fear God, the warning in verse 14 is that he will become “a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling”. Motyer explains this verse as follows:

“It is as if a rock were put across a road to block the traveler from danger but, in carelessness or scorn, he refuses the warning and stumbles to his death. The stress in these verses is that what gives most offence to the sinner and what at the same time constitutes his greatest danger is the presence of the divine.”

Isaiah closes this chapter with a word to his disciples, those who followed Isaiah and believed his words. This is the faithful remnant that God promised to preserve in Chapter 7. The Lord promised to preserve a remnant, and now the Lord uses Isaiah to address this faithful remnant. And the first thing he says to them in verse 16 is “Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples.” He’s talking about God’s Word. “Bind up” means safeguard it from tampering. “Seal” it means mark it as final and safeguard it from addition. The faithful remnant is to be characterized by a faithful commitment to God’s Word.

That’s in contrast with those who have turned away from God. Isaiah tells us in verse 19 that they turn not to God’s Word, but to the words of “mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter”. They have grown so far from the Lord that they prefer the words of the dead over the word of the living God.

It’s a dark picture that mirrors the spiritual darkness in which they lived. Isaiah says in verse 20 that “they have no dawn”. Dawn is a metaphor for a hopeful future, but they didn’t have one. They were so hopeless that when they looked up to heaven it was only to “speak contemptuously against their king and their God”, and when they looked to the earth they saw only “distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.” Motyer says it best:

“They had loved darkness, the darkened rooms in which they consulted the shrouded dead, and divine justice has given them what they loved: darkness all around and a dark future ahead, the nemesis of abandoning their God and of refusing his testimony and law.”

(3) **THE DIVINE KING**

The future is bleak for God’s people. It’s full of darkness, because they loved the darkness rather than the light. They *chose* the darkness. But in the midst of the darkness stood the faithful remnant, Isaiah and his disciples, who had to watch their brothers and sisters abandon their God and put their trust in worldly kings and magicians instead. It would have been easy to despair and give up hope, but they didn’t. How was that possible? Where was their hope? What were they hoping for? That leads us to the climax of our text and our third and final point: The Divine King.

After describing the darkness of God’s people in such bleak language – “distress and darkness”, “the gloom of anguish”, “thrust into thick darkness” – Isaiah opens in verse 1 with these astounding words: “But there will be *no* gloom for her who was in anguish.” Yes, the darkness is thick now, and there appears to be no future, no hope, and no dawn, but the day is coming when there will be no gloom for God’s people.

Isaiah begins his prophecy by speaking about an area of land that would be gloriously transformed. He says in verse 2 that the land of Zebulun and Naphtali had been brought into contempt. Naphtali lay along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Zebulun was west of Naphtali between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean. When Assyria attacked Judah, these were the first of the territories to fall. The Jews were deported and the lands became Assyrian provinces. But here in verse 2, Isaiah prophesies that “in the latter time”, that same land beyond the Jordan and stretching to the Mediterranean sea, would be made glorious.

Those who know the Christmas story know what this is referring to. It’s referring to Jesus. Jesus was raised in the town of Nazareth, which was in the region of Galilee. God would make the land that was brought into contempt *glorious* through the glorious appearing of his Son.

Now we come to the crown jewel of our text, starting in verse 2: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” The gloom of anguish is no more, and the thick darkness has been disbursed, because light has finally pierced the dark shroud of man’s sin and ignorance. The wonderful thing about this verse is that the light wouldn’t just shine. It would be *seen*. The people walking in darkness will *see* the great light. Their eyes won’t be blinded to its beauty. They won’t remain ignorant of its presence. The light will shine on the people, and the people will respond.

Notice also that this glorious, powerful, hope-giving light doesn’t come from man. It comes from God. Tim Keller notes that it doesn’t say “*from* them has light shone”, but “*on* them” (*Hidden Christmas*). Our salvation could never come from ourselves. The blind can’t lead the blind. Those dwelling in darkness have no light. If light is to penetrate our deep darkness, it must come from outside our world, outside humanity, outside our efforts. It must come from God.

That’s the overwhelming emphasis of these verses. The focus is completely on God’s action, not man’s. Verse 3: “*You* have multiplied the nation; *you* have increased its joy”. Verse 4: “For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, *you* have broken as on the day of Midian”. And what is it that happened on the day of Midian? Gideon led Israel to defeat them, not with the 33,000 warriors he originally had, but with 300, so that everyone would know that it wasn’t by their strength that the Midianites were delivered into their hands, but by the Lord’s.

God himself would shine his light into their gloom and darkness. God himself would multiply the nation and increase its joy. How would he do that? Isaiah gives us three ways God would do this in verses 4-6, which all start with the word “*For*”. God would increase the nation’s joy, *for, for, for*. These are all ways that God would increase the joy of his people.

The first *for* is in verse 4, where he says that “the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor” would be broken. God would free his people from their oppression by removing the authorities that ruled over them. The second is in verse 5. “For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.” God will not only free them from their current oppressors. He would free them from every potential future oppressor, because he would put an end to war itself. The third is in verses 6-7, and it is the greatest:

“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.”

Israel’s greatest hope lay not in political victories or even in the end of war. It lay in the birth of a *child*. A child was their greatest hope. And this child wouldn’t just be born. He would be *given*. He would be given by God to his people to rule with wisdom and strength. He would be the “wonderful counselor”, literally the “wonder-counsellor” or the ‘supernatural counsellor”, the one who would speak divine wisdom and revelation to his people. He would be the “mighty God”, the God of angel armies, who would wield divine authority over the nations and the spiritual forces of evil. He would be the “everlasting father”, relating to his people not only as king, but as loving father. He would be “prince of peace”, the prince of *shalom*, peace in the truest meaning of the word: peace with man, and peace with God; peace within, and peace without; peace in work, and peace in play; peace in mind and peace in heart.

This divine child, given to us by God himself, would reign without end or limit in a kingdom of peace, and he would establish and uphold it with perfect justice and righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. This is how the story of the world ends. It ends with a perfect king reigning over a perfect kingdom filled with people made perfect by his light. Who is this king? It is none other than our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Jesus was born of a virgin. Jesus was God’s Word made flesh, the One who fulfilled God’s Word that he would be with us. Jesus made glorious the way of the sea and increased the joy of God’s people by shining his light into our darkness. And on the cross, Jesus would suffer that darkness as he bore God’s wrath on our behalf, so that everyone who follows him and believes in his name would be saved. As Jesus said in John 8:

 “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

**CONCLUSION**

So are you struggling in your faith today? Is your heart shaking as the trees of the forest shake before the wind because of your circumstances, or your sin? Are you begging God for a sign, a reminder that he loves you, that he will protect you, and that he will preserve you? If that’s you, then God wants you to look to the sign he’s already given us, the extraordinary child born in extraordinary circumstances. The birth of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, is all we need to know that God isn’t far from us. He is *with us*. He is *Immanuel*, the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace. God will provide everything you need to persevere as his beloved child through the grace that we have in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you’re struggling not so much with whether God is faithful to you, but whether God is faithful to others. You’ve seen so many professing Christians start strong but fail to finish, people who once seemed to walk in the light but now embrace the darkness. They used to turn to God for help, but now they turn to the powers of this world, and this has given you profound sorrow. God wants you to remember *Shear-jashub*, “a remnant shall return”. That’s his promise, a promise that became flesh, and a promise we know he will keep because *the* Word became flesh, and all of God’s promises find their *yes* in *him*. If we are faithless, God will remain faithful, and he will always preserve a remnant of his faithful ones.

Christmas is about hope. Always has been, always will be. Hope for a better future, hope for the end of our sorrow. Hope for a perfect king reigning over a perfect kingdom filled with people made perfect by his light. This Christmas, may we all be filled with *this* Christmas spirit, a spirit of hope, as we look back to the birth of our Saviour with great joy.