

Why do we have and celebrate Christmas? Because God sent his Son to come to us to save us. That is the basic answer. But there is more to it—much more.

Today, I am sharing with you the backdrop of the Christmas story. And this is a significant message because it is a message of hope against terrible suffering and injustice. Think of it as if God had seen the year 2020 and said, “let’s come down and have Christmas.”

So, if you are having a “2020” or have had one that still lingers in your mind and heart, I pray this message may bring relief, healing, and new hope.

The text is I Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7, and reads as follow:

But there will be no gloom for those who were 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 will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—

on them light has shined.

6 For a child has been born for us,

a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders;

and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually,

and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

To grasp this Scripture's significance, we need to understand the context of what was said and why.

Isaiah 9 is a prophecy of the coming Messiah, Jesus the Christ; he is the child that is named "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Very Christmassy. But before we get to that good part in the following weeks, we need to know that at the time Isaiah prophesied these words, only darkness, gloom, and despair appeared to lay in store for the nation of Israel.

Darkness as black as night prevailed upon the land due to people's bad choices that brought to many suffering and injustice.

Jeremiah succinctly describes this darkness in Jeremiah 7:5-7,

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

As you can see, the people of Israel had forsaken their faith and their heritage as God's people and had behaved in dark ways against each other and abused the weak and vulnerable in their midst. This led them to suffer and devastation. They were conquered by other nations and taken apart and away from their family and land. This is what we understand as the captivity of Israel.

By any measure, there was no hope in the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah. It appeared that Israel's nation was quickly coming to an end for what they had brought upon themselves.

I can only imagine what it must have been like to live through that kind of experience. To see your homeland conquered by an invading army and life as you knew it completely uprooted—must have been devastating.

But thankfully, the story didn't end there, God wouldn't let God's people forsaken, and God promised to bring them from gloom to hope.

In verse 2, we read this promise, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined."

When great darkness draped the people, an even greater light was coming to them. This prophecy was fulfilled about seven centuries later by Jesus of Nazareth.

The apostle John in John 1:9 says this about Jesus, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Furthermore, Jesus said these words about himself and us, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus is the great light that the people walking in darkness needed to see—and still, we need to see as much as then.

Why does this matter? Why is it so important to know and talk about it? Because it reminds us who God is and that we are never forsaken. It does not matter how rough it gets, or even how far away we get from God; God's reach is far beyond our capacity to fly away from him.

Consider this. King David knew this before way before the time of Isaiah and Jeremiah. He spoke about it in Psalm 139:7-12,

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Can you see the recurrent theme? No one can tell you better about God's grace than those who have been saved from darkness. Here is David, basically saying, "God never abandoned me even when I was covered by darkness. God's light always comes in."

This is a foundational Christian teaching that marks the beginning of the end of the darkness domain over humanity. Christmas is a time when we are reminded of this: that God wants to be with us, and that is with us through Jesus the Christ, our Hope.

The birth of Jesus is the testament that God is not against humanity but for us—even when we are at our worst. Jesus said that he did not come to condemn anyone but save everyone who chooses light over darkness. It has always been God's will for no one to perish but have a good, abundant, and everlasting life. This is what Christmas is all about: the incarnation of God

through the Son to bring light to our darkness; life to our death; healing to our sin; salvation to our lostness.

This should matter a lot to all of us. I know that we often act in ways that bring darkness to our lives and the people we love; sometimes, we experience darkness because someone else brought it upon us. Either way, there is no escaping this dreadful experience. And the worst outcome is to believe we are done, that there is no future ahead, or that we a lost cause.

Remember what King David said, “If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

In other words, there is nothing that is too far gone ever from God; there is no place too far away that the light of God doesn't reach even further.

This is what the light of Christ accomplishes in the lives of those who trust him. His light has the power to chase the darkness away. He invites us to turn from walking in darkness and to walk in his light instead. His light enables us to see ourselves from his perspective. His light helps us to see beyond our present moment in time into the glorious future He has assured us of. His light helps us to discern truth from error. His light helps us to respond to one another with love and forgiveness. We no longer need to walk in darkness because the light has come.

I want to finish by sharing a personal experience (don't get too excited; I am not revealing any personal secrets).

Not long ago, I watched the news all the time—like 24-hour news channels every chance I got. I wanted to be informed about everything taking place in our country and around the

world. Then, I soon realized that my constant diet of the news cycle was becoming more of a downer than anything; it literally made me sick—sad and angry. So, now I barely watch it at all.

You see, the issue was and remains that there is no shortage of bad news in this world, and if we don't possess the capacity to see beyond this moment in time, we can quickly become locked in a gloomy perspective. There are plenty of reasons for fear and despair, but only if you stay in the dark because everything changes once you come into the light. What you thought was the end, it was just the beginning of a new life. That is the hope that Christ gives us and reminds us of today and always.

If you can relate to what I am saying, if you feel trapped in a gloomy perspective for whatever reasons, I want to invite you to stop feeding it and break away from it.

What is the stuff you need to let go, the things you need to turn off, or even the people you may need to take a break from to stop the negativity around your life?

All liberation and healing stories start in the same way: choosing the light, welcoming the light, and walking in the light.

Perhaps, this Christmas season will be the most important in your lifetime because of the immense need to choose light, goodness, kindness, compassion, and be willing to receive them as much as we can give them.

This is the hope for us today. By the grace of God, we are made capable of seeing what's up ahead. There are good days ahead; there is hope for all who trust in Christ. He is the one who takes our gloom away.