

Advent Joy and Peace

Isaiah 9:3-6a

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*You have multiplied the nation;
 you have increased its joy;
 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,
 and the staff for his shoulder,
 the rod of his oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.
 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
 and every garment rolled in blood
 will be burned as fuel for the fire.
 For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given. – Isaiah 9:3-6a*

Introduction: Joy Comes from Peace

One of the most remarkable Christmas stories in history comes from the trenches of World War I in 1914. As Christmas approached in Northern France in 1914, soldiers had been engaged in serious warfare since early August and had been in their trenches with barbed wire and the deadly “No Man’s Land” in between since September. In what would become the bloodiest war in European history to that point, modern technology such as the machine gun and chemical weapons would decimate populations of countries across Europe. In one day of one battle in August of 1914, France had seen over 22,000 soldiers killed.

And yet, as Christmas approached, something remarkable happened. Soldiers in the trenches, starting with the Germans, began decorating for Christmas, shouting Christmas greetings to their opponents in the other trenches and even singing Christmas carols. Gradually, the Christmas spirit spread and the soldiers on both sides eventually emerged from their trenches to greet each other, offer warm Christmas wishes and to sing carols together. Christmas 1914 was celebrated with joy and peace, caroling, gift exchanges, worship services and warm fellowship across enemy lines.

What happened in this remarkable event serves as a reminder to us that joy comes to us through peace. As hostility ceases and anxieties subside, we are able to enter into a joy that is not possible when our hearts lack peace.

Many people today experience great anxiety and a lack of peace. For some people experience this even more painful during the Christmas season. Somehow being told to rejoice and celebrate when you feel anxious, depressed, unsettled and insecure only serves to deepen your anxiety and worsen your problem. What is needed, before we can truly rejoice, is a real and lasting peace, especially peace that comes through the lifting of a burden of oppression.

Here in these verses in Isaiah 9, we can see how God brings joy to His people.

I. Joy, Deliverance, Peace

Verse 3 states the blessing God has given His people:

*You have multiplied the nation;
 you have increased its joy;
 they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as they are glad when they divide the spoil.*

This is then followed by three “For” statements which form a chain of explanation, explaining how it is God has given such great joy to His people.

A. Great Joy

Isaiah first sees God multiplying the nation. God had told His people that only a small remnant would survive the coming judgment, which God would bring through conquest and exile by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Before God reduces the nation to a remnant, He gives them hope that they will be multiplied. In Isaiah 11, this future growth is pictured as a shoot growing out of the stump of Jesse and then growing into a branch that bears fruit. It’s a powerful word-picture of the judgment of God in chopping down the unfaithful, unfruitful, idolatrous tree of Israel and then bringing forth new growth and fruitfulness out of the stump.

But God promises to do so much more than just increase the number of His people; He will also greatly increase their joy!

The joy God will give His people is a specific kind of joy, the very best kind. It is the joy of long-awaited satisfaction. The joy God gives causes the people to rejoice before Him with the kind of joy farmers experience at the harvest or warriors experience after a victory when it is time to divide the spoil.

So we see this joy is distinguished by two things: its God-ward orientation and its satisfying nature- like something which has been worked for, fought for and waited for.

This deeply satisfying joy causes God's people to rejoice before Him because they recognize that the joy has come from Him- that He has done the work to bring the lasting, satisfying joy to His people.

B. Comes from a Powerful Deliverance

Specifically, this joy comes as God works a powerful deliverance for His people. In the first of the three "for" statements, Isaiah says:

*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.*

This language of "yoke" and "staff" and "rod" is a bit foreign to us, but this is language of bondage, of oppression, of slavery. Northern Israel, the land of Zebulun and Naphtali that we discussed last week, was under foreign domination by the Assyrians, and they were forced to labor for the Assyrians and to do their will. Today, many of God's people experience yokes of different kinds- sin, addiction, doubt, anxiety, etc.

Isaiah foresees that God's people will experience joy because their burden of slavery and oppression will be broken. And they will rejoice before God because it will be obvious that it is God who has brought them deliverance. "As on the day of Midian" is a reference back to the deliverance God had granted His people from the Midianites under the hand of Gideon the Judge in the Book of Judges. In that deliverance, God took Gideon through extra steps to reduce his army from 30,000 men down to just

300. Then, he armed the 300 men with torches, pitchers and trumpets. God made it very clear to Gideon that He wanted to reduce Gideon's army so that all of Israel would know for sure that the deliverance had come from God and not from themselves.

The irony of the whole Gideon story comes at the end, when Israel praises Gideon and asks him to rule over them. Listen to how the story of Gideon and the Midianites ends:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian." Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." And Gideon said to them, "Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil." (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) And they answered, "We will willingly give them." And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels. And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. (Judges 8:22-27, ESV)

The reference to "as on the day of Midian" tells us two things:

God alone can and will bring the kind of deliverance we really need, the kind that leads to satisfying, God-ward joy.

When God brings this deliverance, we need to make sure we don't take the credit or steal the glory – by pretending that we're better people than we are or acting like we've gotten ourselves to where we are by our own faith, determination, obedience, wisdom, etc.

So, when would this deliverance come? Many Jewish scholars have pointed to an event later in Isaiah as the fulfillment of this prophecy: During Isaiah's ministry, God's people indeed saw a magnificent earthly deliverance from their enemies by the hand of God. Sennacherib and the Assyrians came and plundered Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. They openly mocked the people of God who were helpless before this massive horde of Assyrians. But King Hezekiah and Isaiah together cried out to the Lord, and the Lord sent one angel who in one night slaughtered 185,000 Assyrians. The Assyrians withdrew in stunning defeat. You can read more about this in 2 Chronicles 32 and in Isaiah 37. This was around 700 BC and Jerusalem would stand for more than 100 more years before falling to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

But even this stunning deliverance falls short of fulfilling what God promises and Isaiah foresees here. After all, God's deliverance of His people from the hand of Sennacharib provided only temporary relief. They were eventually taken into exile in captivity. So something more had to be done.

C. That Brings a Lasting Peace

This deliverance Isaiah foresees here is so powerful that it brings an absolute and lasting peace. In the second "For" statement that explains the gift of satisfying joy, Isaiah says,

*For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.*

This is a statement of absolute and lasting peace, which explains exactly how great and satisfying the joy God gives His people truly is. This is a joy that comes from a powerful deliverance brought about directly by the hand of God and which results in an absolute, total peace. This peace is so complete that all warriors' clothing is taken and burned in the fire because it will never be needed again.

How is God going to bring this kind of peace that will bring the gift of lasting, satisfying joy?

II. Child, Son

The third "For" statement tells us exactly how God will bring about this deliverance, this peace, this joy: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given."

A. The Child Who is Born

The Lord will bring peace, joy and deliverance through the birth of a child. What child could Isaiah mean? This child's birth has already been foretold in Isaiah 7:14: "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*" Just as here in Isaiah 9, the prophecy of the virgin giving birth in Isaiah 7:14 seems to have a double meaning, pointing immediately to a promised deliverance from Assyria but ultimately to a greater and final deliverance for God's people.

“Immanuel” means “God with us” and could be interpreted two ways: God is on our side or, more literally, God Himself is physically present with us in this child. I think most Jews who heard the prophecy thought it was the first meaning, but God later makes it clear when He sends His Son into the world that He is indeed Immanuel, God with us. The promised Child who would be born of a Virgin would be God’s Own Son, which is the meaning of the second phrase . . .

B. The Son Who is Given

The child who is born is the Son who is given. Again, you could “dumb down” this prophecy and say it simply means that someone is going to be given a Son. But that’s not what God means. God is saying that He is going to give a Son, His Son, to the people of God, for the people of God.

Later, in Isaiah 11, God repeats and expands on the promise of this Son and the peace He will bring. We already made reference to this passage as a further prophecy of the future increase of the people of God after they are reduced to a remnant, but let’s read it now:

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*
² *And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*
³ *And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.*
*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,*
⁴ *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*
⁵ *Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*
⁶ *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.*
⁷ *The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;*

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.*

⁹*They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

¹⁰*In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.*

Notice how in this prophecy from Isaiah 11, the Promised One is first referred to as a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his roots but later he is simply called “the root of Jesse.” The initial picture is of a tree that has been cut down to a stump and then, sometime later, a new branch grows out from that stump, a branch which is brought up from the root. But later the new branch is not just coming up from the root, but it is the root, the source of Jesse as well as his offspring.

Not only is He both the branch and the root of Jesse, but His rule brings such a universal peace that will bring a final end to all wickedness and harmony to all of creation.

How is that possible?

Well, consider how Micah 5 refers to this promised Davidic king. Last week, we considered Micah 5:2 for the fact that it says that the Messiah King would be born in Bethlehem. Now let's look at the rest of the prophecy from Micah 5:2-5a:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.*

³*Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.*

⁴*And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.*

*And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.
⁵And he shall be their peace.*

Here is a ruler who will come forth, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. That's the same picture as a branch which comes up from the root which is really the root. This future king will really be an ancient, even eternally ancient, King. And notice the emphasis on a woman in labor giving birth to this child, this child who will shepherd His flock in nothing less than the strength of the LORD Himself and will Himself have the majesty of the name of the LORD. He shall be great to the ends of the earth. He – even He Himself – shall be their peace.

Do you see how wonderful and powerful our God is? I don't want you to just see the superficial Sunday School answer that these famous prophecies are about Jesus; clearly, they are indeed – given over 700 years before His birth. But I want you to see what God is saying about Jesus:

He is the root of Jesse and David's greater Son. He is both the physical offspring of Jesse, David's father, thus being of the line of the Davidic kings, but also He is their source, their root.

He is the promised future deliverer and shepherd of God's people who is actually eternally ancient and who alone can shepherd in the strength of the LORD and rule in the majesty of the LORD.

He is the child to be born who is also the Son to be given and the peace that will cover the earth and all of creation.

The peace He brings will be absolutely universal and His triumph over wickedness will be absolute and final.

This is the child whose birth was promised and who we celebrate at Christmas.

III. Then, Now, Forever

A. How can we say Jesus brought these things?

Now, you may be asking: How can we say that Jesus brought these things? Jesus was born over 2,000 years ago as the Promised Immanuel born of a Virgin, God with Us. The Son was given and the angels proclaimed His coming, but here we are 2,000+ years later and the world is still full of wickedness, chaos, conflict, turmoil and death. God's people are still persecuted many places in the world.

Well, one thing we need to say is that when the prophets foresaw Jesus' coming, they saw all of the full and final effects of His coming at once, in a full vision. Some things He has already accomplished, some He is accomplishing now and some remain to be accomplished when He comes again.

But Jesus has already accomplished much. He has come and been born as God with us, Immanuel. He has already worked for us the greatest deliverance from the greatest bondage and oppression we have faced. When He died on the cross, He took the full weight of our sins and our condemnation on Himself and He broke the chains of sin and death in His death and resurrection. By the Holy Spirit, He applies His righteousness and the benefits of His saving work to our hearts, rescuing us from sin's oppression and bondage.

We need to believe in the power of the deliverance He has already accomplished and make sure we do not take credit or steal the glory for it. We are forgiven and delivered not because of anything we have done but because of everything He has done.

B. How can we know Jesus will bring these things?

But while His saving work is finished, He has not yet brought into reality all of the benefits and effects of His kingdom. How can we know that He will bring this universal peace, an end to all wickedness, eternal joy and full and final deliverance from all sin? We can know that He will keep His promises because He has already shown Himself faithful in keeping His promises. Because He was faithful to come the first time and accomplish the work promised on the cross and in His resurrection, we can know that He will come again and bring all things to completion. Isaiah 11 will become reality. Jesus will not fail to do all that He came to do.