

Isolation

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[0 : 00] We want to thank you, almighty God, for your presence with us. And thank you for the promise that as your word is read, so you will speak to us.

But we know that we can only understand you and know you and live in the light of who you are by the help of your spirit. And so we pray that he might be at work among us this morning.

And that you might strengthen us and enlighten us so that we might be the people you want us to be. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Isaiah 9 then, verses 1 to 7. But there will be no gloom for her who was 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 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.

[1 : 08] Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. 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 tumults 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, 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. I feel like I should say Merry Christmas after that. But if you could keep that open in front of you, it would be great to do that.

[2 : 23] And then on the back of the notice sheet, there's an outline of where we're going as well. So as we start, though, I imagine that we've all had the experience of being in a minority somewhere. I was once preaching at a church in South Sudan in Juba.

There were over 2,000 people there, and I was the only white face among them. I guess that's what it feels like to be a Scot in St. Andrews some of the time. I made the mistake once of meeting up with a friend in a bar not far from here who happened to be showing an England versus Scotland football game.

As I stood at the bar, England scored, and there was a slightly chilly silence in the room. Just at the moment, I said to the barman, Could I have a cup of Earl Grey tea, please?

The heads turned in my direction. One or two looked as though they might want to give me a Glasgow handshake. We made the strategic decision to sit outside in the rain for our tea.

In one way or another, they will have all had that experience, that discomfort. These are trivial examples, but of being in a minority. And here in the West, at least, that sense of isolation is something that Christians feel in our society more and more.

[3 : 37] Some of us, I know, will be the only Christian in our family or in our friendship group or in our class, our team on our course or in our office. One child, I know, was in a lesson in which the teacher was discussing Christianity and said to this group of 10, 11-year-olds, Is there anyone here stupid enough to actually believe this stuff?

I think of a friend who married someone who said that he was a Christian at the time that they got married. But any appearance of faith that there was is now a very distant memory.

Some other friends started going to their local church when it was faithful and strong. Over the years, they've watched it drift and decline. Now when they go to church, even, they feel very much

in the minority.

What does God say to someone who is surrounded by people who do not share their faith? That's the situation that the prophet Isaiah was in.

The people of Judah among whom he was living were God's people. They were meant to spur one another on to lives of faith. But we saw last week that instead of doing that, they'd followed the lead of their faithless king Ahaz.

[4 : 52] They'd abandoned their trust in God. So that now Isaiah and a few friends around him were really the only true believers in the whole of their country.

And today in our passage, God tells Isaiah how to respond. And you might see it there in verse 11 of chapter 8. The sovereign Lord lays his strong hand upon Isaiah.

I have no idea what it felt like to experience the strong hand of the Lord laid upon him. But obviously it made something of an impression. And it's there to underline the seriousness of what God says next.

This is the big application really for our whole mourning together. As God warned him not to walk in the way of the people around him.

That's what you do when you're surrounded by people who don't share your faith. God's strong hand upon you. You make sure that you resist the temptation to go with the flow. You don't walk in their way.

[5 : 58] We might say avoid their outlook on life, their approach to life, their priorities in life. And you stay true to God. I want to say that is a vital word for each one of us.

To hear wherever we're at before God this morning. And we've got two character studies to think about. We're going to look at the bad way of the people first and its consequences.

And then we'll look at the way of faith and its promises after that. And the first point I've called the dark distress of a faithless people. So we read from verse 11 again. Bear in mind here that God isn't accusing Isaiah of having already failed in these ways.

He's not assuming that we have either. Although that may be the case for some here. Rather his purpose is to guard us. So that instead of walking in their way, we walk in his.

And bad character trait number one to avoid is to fear everything but God. We've said before that the issue with whom you fear in the Bible isn't about being scared of someone.

[7 : 28] But it's about respecting and revering them to the extent that their desires begin to shape you. Because you want this individual to approve of what you're doing.

And you don't want to upset them or make them angry. And so in that way, their preferences start to define who you are. And Isaiah was living at a time when almost everyone in Judah was fearing political enemies.

It won't be quite like that for us. But they were fearing political enemies more than God. You may remember that the kings of Syria and Israel, just a bit of recap if you weren't here last week, they were poised to attack Judah.

And even though God had promised to protect his people, they chose to reject God's help and to trust in a political alliance with Assyria instead. And so in verse 12, God says to Isaiah, Don't call conspiracy all that this people calls 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. Let him be your dread.

[8 : 41] That is, everybody else may have given up on fearing me and listening to me. But don't you make the same mistake. I am your almighty, holy, and faithful creator.

So fear me, honour me, let me be what defines you. Back in January, some of us heard Jesus say the same thing to his disciples in Luke 12.

Don't fear those who kill the body and after that have no more they can do. I warn you who to fear, Jesus said. Fear him who, after he's killed, has authority to cast into hell.

Yes, I tell you, fear him. Fear God. Later in the New Testament, the apostle Peter quotes these verses from Isaiah. He says of those who oppose our faith today. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.

But in your hearts, regard Christ the Lord as holy. Fear God. I don't know what you'll make of this, but I reckon if we're honest, we'll admit that we all enjoy having the approval of the people who are around us.

[9 : 56] We like to fit in and to be respected by our friends, our colleagues, our family, whoever it is. And if they're not believers, it is really easy to let our hearts be troubled by them to the extent that we live for and make decisions to please them rather than our God.

And God's great prophet Isaiah knew that temptation. It would have been so easy for him at any moment to slip into putting his confidence in the same human solutions as everybody around him. And so God warned him. He warns us. Don't walk in their ways. Don't fear what they fear. Fear me. So bad character trait, number one, fear anything but God.

Two, believe anything but God's word. It's there in verse 19 when they say to you, inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter. Should not a people inquire of their God? I've quoted G.K. Chesterton before. When people stop believing in God, it's not that they believe in nothing. It's that they'll believe in anything. And that was Isaiah's experience. Ahaz and Ko had rejected God.

[11 : 14] Now, without any hint of irony, they approach the prophet of the God that they've rejected and ask him to consult the tea leaves on their behalf. Mediums and necromancers both promise to summon up the spirits of the dead, the sort of thing you'd find in a spiritualist church.

Here it seems the people of Judah want to know what the future has in store for them. And so they say to Isaiah and to his disciples, can't you just look into your crystal ball?

Can you tell us what our stars say? Can you read our palm? Tell us our fortune. Because they don't care what God has to say, but they still want some kind of word from outside.

That pattern is pretty common in the Bible as I've been thinking about it. Generally, when people wander away from God in the Bible, they don't become atheists.

Generally, they just replace the true voice of God with a false word instead. And then they gather around them people who will reinforce what they want to believe.

[12 : 25] And the same is true today. A couple of examples. As a wider society, you'll know we've rejected what God has to say about life after death.

But when someone dies, people still send each other cards promising that they've gone to a better place. And that they're looking down on us from heaven and playing on the fairways in the sky.

They look for little signs to cling on to, to bolster that hope. Someone said to me recently, I'm not religious, but I know that my loved one's gone to a better place because a dog ran up to me on the beach and they used to love dogs.

And I totally understand that desire for confidence and comfort in the face of death. I was taking a funeral just two days ago. But isn't it amazing what people will cling on to for hope when they get rid of God's word?

Or again, you say, we've rejected as a society what God says about morality and how to live. But you don't have to look too hard to find a hundred podcasts and books by new authority figures who reinforce the messages that our society wants to hear.

[13 : 47] Now you might expect that in a post-Christian place like Britain. I think that's what we should expect. But the sad thing here in Isaiah is that it was happening among the people of God.

And so God lays his hand on Isaiah and he warns him, don't walk in that way. Instead, flip the tables and challenge them about where they're looking for answers.

Should not a people inquire of their God? He's to ask. Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? That is, why would you want the word of someone who talks to the dead in place of the word of the living God?

There would be a place for us to ask the same question. Two character traits then of a faithless people. Fearing everything but God and believing anything but God's word. It's one thing to analyze it there and it's another to see where it leads.

And that's what Isaiah does next. I've called it the woe of this people. And in verse 14 there of chapter 8, it's clear that our attitude to God determines our experience of him. So God says of himself, he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel.

[15 : 01] A trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken. They shall be snared and taken. So if you fear God like Isaiah was, you know him as a sanctuary.

But if you reject God like Judah, he becomes a stone of offense. A rock that we stumble on. A trap. A snare.

I'm often teased by our staff team for taking Emily to see films when we're meant to be having a date night that aren't all that romantic. There may be some justification for this scurrilous accusation.

One film we went to see was 127 Hours. I don't know if you know it. The story of Aaron Ralston who was out hiking one day in the canyonlands of Utah.

A 360 kilo boulder became dislodged and fell on him, crushing his arm. You can sympathize with Emily later. And pinning him to a wall at the bottom of a crevice and completely unable to move.

[16:07] And there he remained trapped for 127 hours, hence the name. Five and a half days. He only escaped, this is the exciting bit, when he took a blunt knife out of his rucksack and amputated his own arm.

It's an astonishing story. It's a true story. But picture yourself there for a minute in Ralston's shoes, except without the happy ending. Trapped, entirely alone, and desperately hopeless.

And God says that is where the way of this people leads. I personally will become a trap to them, a snare.

They shall fall and they shall be broken. The image changes in verse 20, but it's just as powerful.

Isaiah says, To the teaching and to the testimony, If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they're hungry, they'll be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God and turn their faces upward.

[17:18] And they'll look to the earth. But behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness. So this time the languages of hunger, distress, gloom, darkness.

They look to heaven, but no help comes. They look to the earth, but only silence. In his book, A Fresh Start, the Australian evangelist, John Chapman, pointed out that in this life, none of us will ever truly be able to comprehend the horror of God's judgment.

And that must be right. But then he includes a little playlet to try and make us think about it a bit more than we do. I thought I'd read it to us.

He had never felt such aloneness before. Where is my wife? He choked. Only that awful echo, not here, your wife is not here.

He tried to piece it all together, but the darkness was too thick. Once in a while, he thought he could see a blurred figure or hear an anguished moan. He remembered the pain, those last moments of terror.

[18:32] But it was nothing compared to the feelings that were creeping into his awareness now. Again, he cried, where is my wife? Your wife is not here. Where are my children?

Your children are not here. He started to grope about in the darkness, but always blindness. My God, he howled again. Let me feel the presence of one single human being.

My God, he hadn't said those words in such a long time. And now they seemed so hollow. Terror was welling up in him. He felt like a small child being threatened by deep darkness.

No candles anywhere, no love anywhere, no voice anywhere. Where is my wife? He screamed.

Your wife is not here. Where are my children? Your children are not here. Then the darkest fear of all came to his mind.

He was terrified to ask, but he knew he'd have to. His whole body trembled as he pursed his lips and wailed into the night. Where, oh, where is God?

[19:40] As the deepest of all darkness closed in on his soul for all eternity, he heard that hideous echo, whispering that most horrifying of all judgments.

God is not here. God says to Isaiah, do not walk in the way of this people because it leads to unimaginable woe.

I think we forget that often when we're faced with sin and temptation. We think we can play and get away with it.

Walk instead in the way of faith. That's our second point this morning, the dawn of peace for a waiting remnant. Two character traits to emulate this time.

They're waiting for the Lord on the one hand and clinging to his word on the other. Really, they're just two sides of the same coin. So glance first to verse 16 of chapter 8.

[20 : 47] Isaiah says, bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will hope in him.

Verse 20, when the people are listening to every voice but God's. Isaiah's battle cry, seven words, to the teaching and to the testimony.

And that is the opposite way. This is the way of a faithful people. This is the, surrounded by a people who fear man and neglect God and who choose to listen to man and not God.

The way of faith is to wait for the Lord by clinging to his word. Remember again, Isaiah almost on his own. He knew what it was to be a minority, isolated, so isolated that you're tempted to walk in the way of the people around you.

But when he heard God's word, he didn't harden his heart in disobedience as it's so easy to do. But resolved, I will wait for the Lord.

[21 : 52] From a human perspective, he had almost nothing to cling to. He was alone. God was hiding his face from Judah. We read in verse 17 there.

But still he said, I will wait for the Lord. Sometimes in life, you will know that it does feel as though there is no light at the end of your tunnel.

You will feel that you've got nowhere to turn. And as you run your mind through every possible future in front of you, they are all bleak.

I have the privilege in my job very often of spending time with people who are dealing with incredible trials in life. And I live, therefore, with some of you through those moments of just real darkness steadfastness and uncertainty.

But can I say very often that the steadfastness and faith, which I see among you and among God's people in those moments, is an inspiration. I remember sitting with someone who was waiting for a diagnosis, fearing the worst.

[23 : 07] His response? I will wait for the Lord. Someone else had to bury their child. Can't think of anything worse to do. I will wait for the Lord.

Someone unemployed for many years. Someone being bullied actively for their faith. Someone facing the end of a marriage. Each time, their response, I will wait for the Lord.

I will cling to His word. And I will trust. And I will wait and wait and wait for the Lord. Later in Isaiah, we're told that God blesses those who wait for Him.

Later again, that God acts for those who wait for Him. The psalmist says, our soul waits for the Lord. He is our help and our shield. And that's the assurance that Isaiah is given here as well.

In verse 14, God promises to be a sanctuary to Him. There's a fancy spa in London called the Sanctuary. That's not what's in view here with all their beauty products.

[24 : 07] This is the Old Testament word for God's tabernacle or temple. This is where God dwells with His people. So this is the promise of God's presence with His waiting people.

Whatever our trial and however isolated we might feel, that still He is present with us. Emmanuel, guarding the eternal well-being of our souls and continuing to do so until He acts decisively to bring about the world of chapter 9.

And we do read it in our carol services. We've had a few sermons on this bit, 9-1-7, over the last few years here in church. My hunch is, if you know any bit of this passage, it'll be this bit.

And so we're not going to spend as much time on it this morning. But what is worth stressing is just how brilliantly it fits the context. Here it comes as the ultimate motivation for Isaiah, for us, to make sure we don't walk in the way of a faithless people, but cling in faith to God and His Word.

It's meant to lift our eyes from our trials to the future, to our God, to our King. And it assures us that however great our present pain, all God's people, every one of us, has a secure and better future in front of us.

[25 : 30] A world not of the darkness of God's judgment, but of light. Not of despair and distress, but of joy. And not of oppression, but of justice and peace. It is a world in which the deepest longings of our heart are fully satisfied, and in which the faithless city has finally become the city and home of righteousness.

righteousness. Now even among those of us who are Christians, you will have known days where it felt as though all was dark. One of you was telling me recently about lying on a floor in agony, crying out to God and asking Him to take you home to heaven.

Others will often feel trapped by your circumstances or the choices that you've made or the consequences of your sin.

Here is a hope and a promise that can sustain us. Because the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

And God has acted in history to increase the joy of His people by defeating the world and the flesh and the devil that seek to oppose and oppress us and to create for us a world of perfect peace.

[26 : 53] And here in chapter 9, that's global peace between nations. I love the picture in verse 5 there. God, as it were, gathering every piece of military and paramilitary hardware in uniform in the whole world.

Every gun and missile and tank and submarine in uniform. And then burning the whole lot in a massive bonfire. Because none of it will be needed anymore.

And what will be left will be a world in which we no longer need a police force or a health service because there will be no more broken laws and no more broken bones. A world in which we'll have no need of therapists and counselors because every one of us will enjoy perfect mental health and will no longer carry any scars.

A world without the need for tissues. We get through so many tissues in our house. In that new world God will have wiped away every tear and there will be no more pain.

The world in which the dwelling place of God is with man and he dwells with us and we are his people and he himself will be with us as our God. That is the future of those who wait on the Lord and cling to his word.

[28 : 15] And it is all made possible through the birth of the child that we've been thinking about all morning. What is God's grand plan for achieving this perfect new world to which we can all look forward if we trust in him?

To us a child is born. To us a son is given. And the government shall be on his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor because Jesus is full of wisdom and mighty God because Jesus is the Lord God Almighty.

He proved it day after day in his life on earth. Everlasting Father because Jesus cares for us and guides us and protects us and wants what's best for us and nurtures us as he proved day after day on earth.

and Prince of Peace because Jesus was willing to die on a cross to give us perfect peace with God forevermore.

And 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.

[29 : 33] the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Friends, that is the future that awaits God's faithful people. It was proven and accomplished when Jesus came the first time and it will be perfected when he comes again.

And so today the Lord lays his strong hand upon us and warns us not to walk in the way of the world around us. That may be the only world that you've ever known and God wants you to stop and think about where it leads and its values.

And he tells us instead to trust in him to cling to his word to trust in his perfect son Jesus. Read a gospel. Find out how wonderful he is to know and follow and wait and wait and wait for him to do all that he's promised.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we simply want to confess how easy it is for us to fear many things in life, many people in life more than we fear you and to put our confidence in words of authority from people other than you to allow those other perspectives to shape us and define who we are. And so we thank you for showing us that even if that way of this people feels good and easy at the time, it's not good for us and it leads to such a trapped and dark place.

[31 : 27] And we praise you that you sent your son, the Lord Jesus, in love to die for people like us so that that need not be our future but that we might know a world of perfect peace and joy and fulfillment and love with you forevermore.

And we thank you for your son, the one who is mighty God, the one who is wonderful counselor, everlasting father and prince of peace.

We praise you for him and we ask that you would help us to cling in faith to his word and to the future that he's promised.

amidst all of our trials and all of our temptations. And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.