

**A LIVING HOPE (9:1-7)**

*Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

*<sup>3</sup> You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. <sup>4</sup> For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.*

*<sup>5</sup> Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.*

*<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.*

*The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*

1. How does Isaiah describe the reversal of fortunes that God will bring Judah?
2. How will God bring about this reversal of fortune?
3. How does Isaiah describe this child?
4. Which of these titles tell us that this child is no mere child?
5. How will this child fulfill Israel's hope?
6. How will this child fulfill our hope?
7. Who is this child, anyway?
8. What does this child offer us that we will not find anywhere else?
9. How do we receive the benefits that are offered through the son who is given to us?



## THE HOPE OF CHRISTMAS

SELECTED PASSAGES FROM ISAIAH

Hope is the joyful longing for something we do not possess. The longing in itself, however, is transforming. It changes the way we think. The way we feel. The things we do. How we respond to tragedy. Hope lifts us up and causes us to pursue life with a renewed sense of vitality.

Of course, our hopes can be misplaced. When we fix our hope on relationships, we quickly find that those we fall in love with are every bit as broken as we are. Rather than being our savior, they like us, are in desperate need of a savior.

When we fix our hope on a career, even if we are fortunate enough to land our dream job, we quickly find that our careers are not as satisfying as we thought they would be. We achieve our goals. We wonder what is next. We hope what is next will be more satisfying than everything that has come before.

As affluent suburbanites we tend to fixate on stuff—the right house, in the right neighborhood, with the right car and a garage full of really cool toys. Throw in a healthy entertainment budget and you are living the suburban dream. The problem is that no matter how great your house, or car, or neighborhood, or toys, the new quickly wears off and we are left looking for something else. We spend a lot of time and energy pursuing things, many of them good things, none of them ultimate things. All of them eventually let us down.

So is hope simply an illusion? Or is there something somewhere or someone we can fix our hope on that will not let us down? Isaiah would say, “Yes.” Without hesitation he tells us, “Those who hope in the Lord will not be disappointed (Isaiah 49:23).”

The hope that Isaiah describes is the hope of Christmas—a sure and certain hope.

## **MISPLACED HOPE (29:13; 7:14-16)**

Israel's story is a story of misplaced hope. After a brief golden age under the reigns of David and Solomon the nation splits in two. The northern ten tribes rebel against the Davidic monarchs in Jerusalem and form the nation of Israel. The southern two tribes coalesce around the capital and the temple and become the nation of Judah.

Israel quickly abandons God and turns to idols. Judah experiences a few brief moments of devotion to God, but they are few and far between.

200 years and sixteen kings later, Isaiah arrives on the scene as a royal courtier in the nation of Judah. He lives and works in the king's palace in the city of Jerusalem.

He is assigned the impossible task of warning Judah of impending doom when by all appearances everyone is doing pretty well. The nation is prospering. The people are prospering. As far as the people and her leaders are concerned, everyone is doing just fine.

As far as God was concerned their hearts are as far from him as they could possibly be. While the people continue to offer sacrifices in the temple, they are simply going through the motions. God offers a stinging indictment, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me (Isaiah 29:13)."

In the meantime, Israel has formed a formidable alliance with Syria, and they are intent on defeating Judah, plundering her wealth and subjugating her people. Ahaz, the king of Judah panics and forms alliances with Egypt and Syria.

Isaiah warns him that his alliance with Egypt will be unreliable and his alliance with Syria will be his undoing. Isaiah reminds Ahaz that God promises to be with his people and encourages him to trust in God. He invites Ahaz to ask God for a sign of his faithfulness—any sign. Ahaz refuses. So God offers a sign:

*The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, <sup>16</sup> for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste (Isaiah 7:14-16).*

Isaiah takes a wife and the son born to them fulfills the sign offered to Ahaz. Before the child can speak, Israel and Syria have come to nothing. In spite of the fact that God has fulfilled his promise, and in spite of the fact that Isaiah has warned Ahaz against trusting in political alliances, Ahaz continues to rely on his alliances rather than God.

Isaiah, however, continues to speak of "Immanuel." The sign that God offered to Ahaz reaches far beyond its immediate fulfillment time of Isaiah. It

points to another child. A child that will demonstrate in a far greater way that "God is with his people." A child that will reverse the fortunes of the nation, sit on the throne of David and bring peace to all people.

1. How might the perception, "we are doing just fine, thank you," be deceiving?
2. How would you describe someone who "honors God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him?"
3. How often do you feel like you are just going through the motions?
4. What are some of the issues that cause us to panic and look to other things for our comfort and security rather than looking to God?
5. How do we turn our hearts back to God when we sense ourselves becoming more and more complacent?

## **THE DESPERATE SLIDE INTO DEEP DARKNESS (8:19-22)**

*<sup>19</sup> When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? <sup>20</sup> Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. <sup>21</sup> Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. <sup>22</sup> Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*

1. The people in Isaiah's time were tempted to look to spiritists and mediums. What are some of the things we tend to turn to for comfort and security?
2. According to this passage, where should we turn?
3. What are the results of turning to other things?