

The Dawning Light

When you look around at the world, what is your overall perspective? If you listen to the news, life seems to be increasingly challenging. Inflation has squeezed people's budgets. Covid has been politicized. Seeds of doubt have been planted so deep it's hard to discern what is true and what isn't. There's protests in Iran, a war in Ukraine, and today people remember the starvation of 4 million Ukrainians in the 1930s. Division seems to be growing, spreading, and the ability to listen to others seems so difficult. It would be so great to flip over the calendar and start a new year. We'd love to just get away from it all.

Our problem, however, isn't that we need a new calendar. We need a new world. History is chaotic and humans have a propensity to mess things up. We are reactionary. We make new problems by fixing old ones. We swing the pendulum from one extreme to the other. And we are always hopeful that something better is around the corner. So we make New Year's resolutions, we set goals, we dream about a better "me" or a better family or church, only to find that our fickle hearts couldn't keep our resolutions and goals for more than a week or two, maybe a month if we're fortunate. Life feels harder and joy feels more elusive than we care to admit.

And then there is our relationship with God. We want to glorify him. But in those moments where we are completely honest, we can acknowledge that we won't achieve his glory. In fact, we are often a hindrance to his glory – divided hearts, spiritually suspicious, and not fully living for God. So our problem is more deep than we realized – it is rooted in our hearts. And darkness and gloom settles in. And then we wonder: is joy even possible?

Isaiah says, "Yes!" What will bring about this joy? If God promises infinite, irresistible joy in Isaiah 9:3. How is it that God's passion for his glory is going to increase my joy in a world full of darkness? How does God break through the darkness to bring the dawning light? Isaiah 8-9 is God's answer how he will bring his glory and our joy in a world of darkness and chaos. In a world where politicians, institutions, and people fail – you and I fail – how will God do this? The final phrase of our passage today answers that question: "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." And this statement is the answer to how we can have the increased joy that Isa. 9:3 tells us about. God is passionate for his own glory, and that zeal for his own glory is the reason you and I can have joy. So let's see how Isaiah connects God's passion for his own glory and our joy in chaotic times.

First, God's glory brings joy as we **Wait Upon Our Sufficient God (8:9-8:22)**.

As we move back in the book to chapters 8 & 9, we are reading about the days of King Ahaz. He had become fickle as a king, fearful of the surrounding superpowers that threatened Judah. Instead of trusting in the Lord, Ahaz was trying to form political alliances to keep Judah safe. His unbelief was evident, and it was leading the nation astray, into darkness and gloom. But unbelief would not defeat God's purposes. God's zeal would preserve for himself a people who would live by real faith, trusting in God. So what do God's people believe about God in chaotic times? His zeal will accomplish his purposes and bring increased joy by his sufficiency as the

God who can accomplish all things for our joy and his glory. And he promises three things that will accomplish his purposes.

First, he promises his presence to be with us (Isa. 8:9-10). The nations are raging and the people's plot in vain against the Lord (Ps. 2). People are worried about politics. They want to be on the right side of history, so people choose the political narrative that makes sense to them, to bring their salvation. But God's people have a different view of history. What is often called "the right side of history" is so myopic that what is popular today becomes a problem tomorrow because of human fickleness.

So God's people look at the crises of this world and say, "Be broken and be shattered, and listen up all you countries!" In other words, the nations may rage against God, but Christians should not be addicted to the agitated news cycles. News will give us all sorts of disconnected information without any overarching understanding of what is going on. How do we make sense of this? In v. 10 tells us that while history is moving along and it feels tumultuous at times, "God is with us." The unshakeable promise of God is that when we turn to him, his zeal is that we would learn his presence is sufficient for us, he would dwell with us. And when God is with you, the news cycles can be confusing, but God is with us.

Second, he promises his fear will guide us. Isaiah says that it was a strong hand of the Lord guiding him (v. 11). He had a profound God-consciousness guiding his urgency. While the world is prone to conspiracy theories and suspicion of any authority, we don't need to be shaken. CNN and Fox News, Global or CBC are not reliable guides for stability and to give us meaning and an understanding of reality. Neither are the independent news sources. The world is filling up with conspiracy theories, and people are filled with fear. But they are filled with the wrong fear. What is urgent in the news is not what is urgent from the perspective of God, the fear of God (8:13). We need to regard God as holy. We don't need to respond to crises like God isn't God. We need to respond by faith.

You cannot avoid God. It's impossible, Isaiah says. He will either be a rock of refuge to you or he will become a stone of offense (8:14). Because God rules and reigns over history, it will either give you rest at night and comfort your soul, or it will anger you because you don't like how God is directing history. Your response to him will be how you experience him. If you believe his promise, he will be your refuge, your sanctuary. If you deny him, he will become a stumbling block and a snare. He is the God of history. You can't avoid him. You will experience God as either your sanctuary or your snare. Jesus would take this verse and say that this is how people would experience him (Matt. 21:44) – those who oppose him would stumble on this stone. But those who believe would find him to be a refuge in times of hardship. You cannot avoid the reality that God is in control of history. His sufficient Lordship of history will either give you great relief or great regret. When you regard him as holy, as the One who has the beginning from the end in his hands, then you can wait upon our sufficient God to fulfill his promises.

Finally, he promises that his truth will prevail and give us hope. In a dark day, what will take us through is a word from God. Isaiah is told to preserve this message (v. 16) because Ahaz won't listen. But notice what Isaiah is to do – bind up the teaching, and hope in him! But when people

refuse to listen to the truth of God, they have no dawn (v. 20). People who do not want the truth of God will resist it, but they act like the only thing that matters about history is now!

What makes God sufficient for you is not what you see by you judging his faithfulness by how the news cycles are proceeding. I don't judge God by what I see when is his presence, his fear, and his prevailing truth that I hope in (v. 16). Here is our response in the face of darkness – we don't go to sources that rely upon politics or other spiritualities. People may look to their own ways (v. 22). But I will trust in God when it's dark by looking to him – his presence, his fear, his prevailing truth. When darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unchanging grace; IN every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil. On Christ the Solid Rock I stand! When you see how God is zealous to accomplish his glory in history, a topsy-turvy world is no hindrance to God. It is God's way of shaking the heavens and the earth so that you and I will trust him more fully.

As we trust in him, we can then **Watch for the Dawning of Messianic Joy (9:1-7)**.

God loves to do his best work where things look the bleakest. God loves to do his best work in the darkest nights (vv. 1-3). Where there is great sorrow and darkness is where he loves to break in with his light. God's strategy, you see, is that he wants to make it clear that the zeal for his glory has accomplished this, not human ingenuity and skill. God knows how we love to steal glory and place confidence in ourselves. So when he brings about his new work, he wants it to be evident that he alone was the one to accomplish it. God begins his new work in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, moving beyond the Jordan River to Galilee and to the ends of the earth. These regions are where the superpowers would move through – coming from the north, then down into Galilee, and then to Jerusalem. But when the light comes, it will come in the places that felt the darkest, the most difficult. And when the light dawns, there will be no gloom. Because when you have a revelation of the glory of God, he fills your heart with joy (v. 3)! And that joy is like a farmer who is ecstatic at the incredible harvest or the soldier who has won the battle and gets the loot from the victory. How will he do this? He gives us three reasons, each telling us with the word "for".

Where life has been hard, I believe God would be pleased to bring joy in those dark places. Where you have felt the disciplining hand of God, he is pleased to break his light into your darkness and reverse the pain to joy. And vv. 4-7 explain how he will bring about this miraculous joy by using the word "for" in verses 4, 5, and 6. The way that God brings joy to your heart and light to the world that will alter the course of history and your life is that he will send a freedom fighter like Gideon who will rescue you from oppression. But not only will he end oppression (v. 4), he will end war himself (v. 5). He will be a powerful world leader who will alter the course of history.

Who is this world leader who will alter the course of your life as well as world history? Who is going to win the war and accomplish the dawning light of joy? God's answer to everything that terrorizes us is a child. A baby. God is so confident in his power and glory that he can defeat armies with a baby and alter the course of your life and steer world history with a little baby. God's zeal for his glory is wrapped up in a little baby so that the weakness of God overcomes the

power of this world and the foolishness of God destroys the wisdom of this age. By a baby he can divide history – B.C. and A.D. – and can rule the world as...

...the Wonderful Counselor – he has the best ideas so that you can trust him!
He is the Mighty God – he is the strong warrior so you can find refuge in him!
He is the Everlasting Father – his love is never-ending so you can enjoy him!
He is the Prince of Peace – his reconciliation wins his enemies so you can worship him!

And upon his shoulders will be the government – he is the one who rules history. He reigns. History is not out of control. His influence is only increasing. His gospel is prevailing. History is going his way (9:7)! It might not look like it, but it is.

For one dark night, when there were only shepherds in a field, a light dawned. People who weren't expecting joy were told about the birth of a child. They were filled with the fear of God because of the dawning of glory – it scared them. But when they heard the announcement of good news, they went and found a baby who filled them with great joy – the presence of God, the promise of God, the prevailing truth of God that had broken into the world – so satisfying they had to go and tell everyone about it!

And ever since God entered history as a human being, he has continued to move history towards the goal of his glory. This year is no exception. Yes, it has its hardships. Yes, we want to see it come to an end. But the answer isn't a new calendar. The answer is waiting and watching for the sufficient God of history who brings his joy in Jesus.

If God can divide history by a baby in a manger, then can't he care for you? If he can send his very own Son into this world to bring life and light, then isn't the answer to your problems not a new job, new place, a new calendar, but a new trust in a God who is going to bring a new world because he has history in his control – from beginning to end?

When you know the presence of God is with you, when you fear him more than you fear the latest news, and you trust his word – what you will find is that history is not out of control, but it is moving moment by moment to the goal of it all. And he's got you. It started to unfold most clearly with a little baby and it looked weak and foolish of God. But this is how God works – his joy breaks forth when you see that he has always been working all of history towards his purpose. It started with a baby. It will end not with a new year, but a new world of peace, joy, and delight forever.