

Isaiah 9:1-7
Waiting for the Lord
Christ Church Liverpool
November 2005

My wife Gaynor and I have many things that we enjoy doing together. But one of the more challenging aspects of married life for us is going to Blockbuster. When it comes to movies we have fairly seriously incompatible tastes. One of Gaynor's least favourite films ever, for example, is *The Shawshank Redemption*. Whereas I think it's one of the best movies I've ever seen.

The Shawshank Redemption, for those who haven't seen it, tells the story of Andy DuFrein, imprisoned for killing his wife – but he didn't actually do it. The film centres around a small group of characters and is, essentially, an exploration of how they cope with being part of the brutal regime of Shawshank prison. Essentially all of the characters that deal with prison keep looking to the future. They refuse to allow their minds to be controlled by the fact that they are in prison. They retain something in their hearts that means in some sense they are at liberty. As the strapline for the film puts it: "Fear can hold you prisoner, hope can set you free."

Of course that's not an idea that is by any means unique to *The Shawshank Redemption* – though I think they deal with the theme particularly well in that movie. In fact it's almost a commonplace in writings about the human condition. Without aims, ambition, plans, hope – call it what you will – people shrink and shrivel and die. You can see it in a thousand different ways in society – the misery caused by long (or even quite short) term unemployment. The destruction of a dream of a future together when someone breaks up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. The despair brought on by clinical depression.

Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.

And of course what is true of individuals can also be true of groups of people. Hope can lift a nation. Retailers often speak of the feel good factor occasioned by being of the verge of winning a major sporting trophy. One of the worst aspects of the London bombings in July was that they came hot on the heels of the announcement that the city had won its bid to host the Olympics – the hope of that great event was superseded by the terrible, pointless wickedness of the bombers.

Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.

During the reign of the wicked king Ahaz (not to be confused with King Ahab who was the king of the other bit of Israel and also also wicked) the great hope of the nation of Judah, the southern bit of Israel, was the nation of Assyria, the regional superpower at the time.

Judah was being threatened by the nations of Aram and Ephraim in the North and, instead of following Isaiah's advice and relying on no one but God himself to save the nation, King Ahaz decided to make a treaty with Assyria. The result would be disaster.

In chapter 8 God tells his people that by seeking foreign aid they have rejected his help. That help would have been like the gently flowing waters of Shiloah. They have turned away from a gentle, cleansing, pure spring and chosen instead the help of Assyria.

Instead they have chosen the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates river. Judah and Ahaz's plan was that Assyria would come in and duff up Ephraim and Aram. But you cannot expect a huge wave just to stop precisely where you'd like it too on the beach – they have a habit of running on and getting your feet wet.

Well so it was with Assyria. In the end the Assyrians invaded not only Ephraim and Aram but Judah too. They came, in fact, as far as the very walls of Jerusalem – as Isaiah poetically puts it "*sweeping on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to its neck.*"

It was a time of terrible darkness and distress. A time when many of those in the land who had sought to remain faithful to God and his word were confused and frightened. And in response to those very real fears God, through Isaiah, offers, in this passage, a message of hope.

A message that can help us this morning to be renewed in hope – both as individuals and as a church family. A message that should remind us why it is worth being a Christian even in a world full of broken dreams. A message that was written 600 years before the birth of Jesus Christ but which is all about him.

1 Hope dawns on people living in death-darkness (v1-3)

The invasion came from the North. And it was the North of the old, united, nation of Israel that bore the brunt of the Assyrian's terrible slaughter. The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali faced terrible destruction and disgrace. It was their own fault of course. Right from the beginning of the existence of the nation of Israel they had failed to drive out the awful pagan tribes that had lived there previously. So much so that Isaiah can describe it as "Galilee of the nations."

But within that part of the country there were many godly people who mourned for what had happened. God's country had been invaded. Yes they knew this was God's just judgment on their wickedness. But nevertheless what a terrible thing that the land had been taken back by pagans as wicked and ruthless as those God had taken it away from. These people, God's faithful remnant, continued to walk, v2, they were determined to be faithful. But everything around them seemed like a terrible night.

The situation would seem so bleak that it would be like, v2 there, living in the shadow of death. Like living, literally, in death-darkness.

This summer on the camp I did, we took a group of the young people to White Scar Caves at Ingleton in the Yorkshire Dales – a good afternoon out if you're ever up there. As you'll know if you've ever done any of those going in a cave type tours there's always a bit where they switch the lights off. And when they do it is dark. Darker than the darkest night. So dark you cannot see anything at all – not your body, not the other people in the cave, not anything. That is the kind of darkness we are thinking about here. Death-darkness. As dark and silent and hopeless as the grave.

It is, God says, on those people – the people in this hopeless situation that the light will dawn. Those northern parts of Israel, the first to suffer God's judgment at the hand of the invading Assyrians, will, v2, be honoured. They will be blessed.

That does not mean that everybody in that situation will be rescued. Some, according to 8:21, will respond to God's judgment, they will respond to the darkness, by cursing not only the king of the nation but by cursing God himself.

But those who, in the darkness, walk with God, will see a great light.

In a fallen and messed up world everybody experiences the darkness of God's judgment. We live in a world under God's judgment – natural disaster, sickness and death are signs of that all around us all the time.

And though undoubtedly we all experience that darkness in different ways and to different degrees – some perhaps living what seems like a relatively easy life, others in this room afflicted with illness, bereavement, family troubles or depression – what is significant is how we respond.

Whatever your situation this morning, and I am sure many of us face very difficult things, can I encourage you not to respond by blaming and cursing God and bringing ultimate destruction on yourself.

We need to respond to whatever darkness we face by walking with God and looking for the dawn.

When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been imprisoned he took that as a sign that it was time for him to begin his own preaching ministry.

He returned from Jerusalem to the North of the country. Matthew's gospel puts it like this...

"He went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – to fulfil what was said by the prophet Isaiah: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

And his message? *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.*

Hope dawns on people living in death-darkness.

2 Hope brings great joy because... (v3-5)

One of the great things about being a student is the opportunity to go to parties. My experience of being at university was that there seemed to be parties happening all the time. As long as you turned up with your half bottle of vodka or appropriate number of bottles of beer you could easily go to a party every Friday and Saturday night every week

of term. By far the best parties though were the ones that weren't just entirely random. The best parties actually celebrated something. When we had finished all our final exams a group of my friends and I got together and organised a Chicago Gangster themed party in our flat – lots of plastic machine guns, hats and, for the ladies, feather boas. But it was a great party mostly because it celebrated a real achievement. There was a cause, a reason, for our joy.

There are all sorts of causes for joy and celebration aren't there?

The birth of a child, a wedding, finishing exams, achieving a particular birthday, getting a new job.

Some of those things just happen – they have no cause other than God's providence making them so. Others involve effort and commitment on our part.

Well the joy that is brought about by what God does is like the excitement of all those parties rolled into one.

At the dawn of hope God's people rejoice before him like they do when the harvest is safely gathered in for another year and they know they will eat well for the next months. It's like the way people celebrate when a terrible enemy is vanquished and the threat of violent death is dispelled – think of those great party scenes at the end of *Return of the Jedi* or *Lord of the Rings*.

So what is it about God's hope that brings such joy?

Well two things. Firstly...

a) God's people are released from oppression (v4)

It is a terrible thing to live under the shadow of oppression. Most of the nations of the world have a day in their calendar which is dedicated to celebrating a time when they were freed from captivity to another nation or power. For the French that is Bastille Day, a day when the people were liberated from the terrible oppression of their own government by the aristocrats and King Louis XVI. For the Americans it is July 4th, a day when the people were freed from injustices of British rule.

For the ancient Israelites it was Passover. A day when the nation remembered their rescue from slavery under the yolk of the Egyptians.

Most of the words in v4 are deliberately designed to remind any thoughtful Jew of the events of that Passover – yoke, burden, bar, shoulder, rod and oppressor are all words that you find in the Bible's account of the Exodus and the many references to it.

The rescue that God is going to achieve for his people living in death-darkness is going to be like a second Exodus.

It was going to be so astonishing, so amazing, that it will require the language of the greatest rescue God had ever performed – the Exodus – to describe it.

What God does, when Jesus comes, is perform an astonishing rescue from oppression.

Perhaps there are some people in our gathering this morning who, like me, have been Christians for quite a long time.

I've been a Christian for just over 13 years now. And to be honest sometimes I find myself wondering whether life wouldn't be easier if I didn't bother. Do you ever feel like that? Ever feel that to get up, go and do your job and then spend the rest of your life doing more or less exactly as you pleased would be so much simpler. No need to think about how much money you are giving. No need to reflect on how considerate and loving you are being to other people in the church. No need to set the alarm clock early to get up and read the Bible. No need to sweat late at night over a sermon or house group notes. No need to worry about how to explain who Jesus is to your colleagues.

Well of course the truth is that in many ways in this life it is easier not to be a Christian. And the full and wonderful benefits of liberation won't be seen until we are with Christ forever in the new heavens and the new earth.

But when I feel like that, when you feel like that, we need to remember that not to be a Christian is to live a life of oppression.

Because of Jesus, Christians are released from a terrible and crushing burden of slavery to sin, to this world and to the rule of Satan.

Maybe there are some here today, perhaps many, who have been brought up in Christian homes and can never remember not having been a Christian. You may well be able to identify moments when your understanding deepened and grew but, essentially, as far as you can tell, you have always trusted Jesus.

Sometimes I meet folk who would prefer that not to have been the case. Who almost feel as if they would like to have had a wicked and rebellious phase of rejecting God entirely and then a clear and distinct conversion experience. Can I say to you, as someone who lived for 18 years without God and without hope in the world, that you are immensely privileged. The non-Christian life is a life of oppression and slavery. Often of invisible bonds and unrealised shackles. But a terrible slavery to sin and death nonetheless. You do not want to have lived a minute more of such a life than necessary.

And if you aren't a Christian here this morning don't put off becoming a Christian thinking that somehow not being committed to Jesus is preserving your freedom. All you are doing is prolonging your slavery.

God's rescue releases his people from terrible oppression.

b) God's people experience peace... (v5)

For most of us here, unless we have any military families amongst us today, war means reading about some terrible things in the newspapers and seeing the odd distressing picture on our TV screens.

For the average ancient Israelite war meant your father, husband or son packing up a bag of belongings and heading off to a high likelihood of death. And almost certainly a horrible, and painful death at that.

What an amazing prospect therefore that when God comes in his rescue every item that can be used for warfare will be destroyed. That the military hardware of a nation will be nothing more than firewood.

God's promise is that his rescue will bring not just freedom but peace.

3 When God's perfect king is born (v6-7)

Have you ever met someone with a really powerful personality? The kind of person who just needs to appear in a room and it falls silent. I'm told, though I've never met him, that former US President Bill Clinton is just such a personality. The kind of man who can command huge audiences with a wave and a smile. Well imagine someone so powerful that he can make wars cease and nations fall just by his presence.

A perfect kingdom, the kind of kingdom that is hoped for in these verses, needs a perfect king.

The way that God's astonishing promises of liberation and peace are going to be brought about is through the birth of a perfect king. It is with the birth of a child that the light dawns.

I imagine that there are some people here who are what I call "Christmas freaks". The kind of people who are actually genuinely pleased when the Christmas decorations start appearing in the shops. My fellow elder Jeremy Clark is one such weirdo. Personally I'm more of a Christmas rebel. There are few things that irritate me more than the appearance of excessive quantities of selection boxes, tins of biscuits and twinkling fairy lights in Tesco's by about the 20th September.

But while it's entirely appropriate for Christians to have a special focus on the incarnation, the coming of God in human flesh, at a particular time of year, actually Christians should be into Christmas all year round. Because what Christmas celebrates – the coming of God to our broken world to rescue us from darkness – is gloriously true 365 days a year.

No other religion, no philosophy, has anything like the hope of genuine biblical Christianity. We have a God who came to earth, who became human, who became like me – and yet also gloriously not like me. The child given to us, Jesus Christ, is Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

He is the wisest king ever. His counsel is so wonderful that even the wisdom of Solomon looks like the work of an amateur agony aunt in comparison.

He is Mighty God, Everlasting Father. Useful verses, by the way, if anybody tries to suggest to you that Jesus isn't God! Also interesting if you happen to be thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity that Jesus, in some way, IS the Father!

He is the Prince of Peace – the only one who can end wars and atrocities and terror and fear.

I wonder this morning if Jesus Christ is those things to you?

Very often I think that Christians want God to do something very specific in our lives in order for us to trust and have hope in him.

Perhaps we're suffering from some sort of illness, physical or mental. We want God to cure us and then we'll trust him.

Perhaps we are fed up with unemployment. We want God to find us a job and then we'll trust him.

Maybe we are not happy being single. We want God to find us a special person and then we'll trust him.

Maybe we're waiting for God to work decisively in our children's lives so that we can be confident they are Christian before we trust in him.

Well can I say to you this morning that that sort of thinking will only lead you to fear and being a prisoner.

Of course we know that God has done wonderful things for every Christian here this morning.

In his death and resurrection God in Christ has DONE everything that we need to bring us a perfect eternity, starting today.

But in a very real sense God in Christ had DONE everything we need the moment that Jesus Christ was born as a baby in that stable in Bethlehem.

Jesus' birth, God coming to live amongst us, guarantees all of the blessings that God has for all of his people for all eternity.

The sign of the child being born means that we can be utterly confident that a perfect king will reign over a perfect kingdom of justice, peace and righteousness for all time.

The confidence of the Christian, your confidence this morning if you are a Christian, is not some vague hope in God. It is not about a nebulous sense that he will somehow sort stuff out.

It is a definite confidence, a real hope, in the present AND future reign of a child who has already been born, 2000 years ago, guaranteeing everything God will do to bring blessing to his people.

Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.

The child has been born. And he is Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

He will reign for ever and his reign, which has already begun, will be perfect.

If you are a Christian here this morning can I encourage you this week that you ought not to be afraid.

God has liberated you from oppression. God has brought you peace with him. God has guaranteed your future so that no illness, stock market crash, disappointment, failure or mistake can spoil it.

*Andrew Evans
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