

## **“Have Yourself a Nostalgic Christmas”**

**Isaiah 9:1-7**

**December 20, 2015**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Christmas is the most nostalgic of our holidays. Do you know what I mean by nostalgia? It is that feeling that connects us to a longing from our past. I remember a time a few years ago when I was driving through the community where we had lived in Baltimore before moving to Birmingham. When I drove past the baseball fields where I had coached our oldest son's baseball team ten years prior to that time, this powerful wave of nostalgia washed over me, enough to bring tears to my eyes. At the time I was driving past those fields, my son had just left home to go to college, and I think my nostalgia was triggered by my longing for a past in which my son would wake up in the same house as me every morning.

Christmas works similarly, triggering deep longings inside. Think with me for a minute about these longings associated with Christmas. It is the longing for gifts that surprise and delight, for family togetherness, for sharing good food and good conversation with those we love and who love us, and for a more permanent peace and joy. Is this kind of nostalgic longing a good thing to be embraced, or a childish thing to outgrow? I recently came across C. S. Lewis' definition of nostalgia, and it has helped me answer this question. Lewis defines it as “our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside.” Lewis would say, then, that these feelings of nostalgia are not something to be outgrown, but something to be embraced. If we think they are something to be outgrown, we become hard and cynical.

Consider the Kris Kringle tradition as seen in the movie *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*. It is a movie that contrasts one who believes in the realities of Christmas with the modern, cynical person who believes that there is no reality beyond what can be seen and touched and rationally proven. Lewis would say that our feelings of nostalgia at Christmas are to be embraced as that which points us to the deeper realities of the universe. These feelings are, as Jerram Barrs refers to them, ‘echoes of Eden,’ reminding us of life as God created it to be and of life as it will once more be when Jesus finishes his restoration work in our lives and in his universe. These feelings are the whispers of God to us, inviting us to a renewed hope in Jesus as the one who will restore us to the paradise of Eden, and distancing us from the cynicism that is so abundant in our age. Let's look further into these realities and the one who can bring them to us as we explore this well-known passage from Isaiah.

## I. The Loss

If Christmas is the whisper of God about his restoration project, then it invites us to consider first the loss. Isaiah 9 describes the light that comes after darkness, and the darkness is described in the previous chapter. This darkness is summarized in the last verse of the chapter. **“And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness”** (8:22).

Isaiah was writing to the southern kingdom of Judah after the nation of Israel had been divided into a southern and northern kingdom. Judah was facing two major threats at this time. The first was an attack by a coalition army of the northern tribes of Israel and of Syria, nations far more powerful than Judah. It would be like America and Canada coming together to invade Mexico. The king of Judah was an evil king named Ahaz. He knew his nation was in trouble. God had revealed what Israel was to do when they faced forces too powerful for them. They were to call out to their Lord for deliverance, just as the great King David had done when he faced down the mighty warrior, Goliath. 2 Kings tells what he did instead. **“So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel [the northern tribes were called by the name *Israel*], who are attacking me. Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king’s house and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Kir, and he killed Rezin [the king of Syria]”** (16:7-9).

Ironically, Judah’s second threat was their deliverer against the first threat of Syria and Israel. Assyria ended up invading both Syria and the northern nation of Israel. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali that are mentioned in verse 1 are two of the tribes taken captive by Assyria. Now Assyria is threatening Judah too. The previous chapter speaks of the Assyrian threat as a great flood that is covering this entire region. He says that it will reach **“even to the neck of Judah”** (8:8). We would say that we “have just one nostril above the water line.”

To walk in darkness, then, is to trust in a deliverer who ends up betraying you at a later time. We trust in the wrong deliverer and then get hurt by that deliverer. This is the story of all addictions. The alcoholic or drug addict looks to the drug to help him cope with the challenges of life. Like Ahaz looking to Assyria, it works for a while but then betrays. There are more socially acceptable addictions that do the same. Whether it is an attractive appearance, money, success, or popularity, when we trust in these things they end up betraying us. They seem to work for a while, but then bring great damage to

our lives. To walk in darkness is to trust the things that cannot deliver, and then to fall into hopelessness when they let us down.

## II. The Restoration

Isaiah 9 multiplies images that speak of restoration. In place of deep darkness, there is not just light but a **“great light”** (v. 2). In place of distress, there is great joy. The joy is described in verse 3. **“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.”** He uses two images here, that of the harvest and of plunder. These promises touched on the two most common fears of this day: fear of the failure of the harvest, leading to starvation, and fear of an invading army, leading either to death or servitude. I don't know today what you are most afraid of. Perhaps it's a health issue. Maybe it's a financial setback. Maybe you are troubled over your children. Perhaps your job is at risk, your marriage threatened, or you are overwhelmed with loneliness in your life. Those are all powerful fears. But there is another reality in life, whispered to us by the nostalgic feelings evoked at Christmas. It is the reality of verses six and seven, to which we now turn.

How will God bring about the kind of restoration from such staggering losses as mentioned in the previous chapter? Surprisingly, he will do so through a child. **“For to us a child is born.”** But this will be no ordinary child, because he will be able to shoulder the weight of all governing responsibility and bring about this joyful situation described earlier. We are correct to read this as a description of our Lord Jesus. It is because of the greatness of his name that he will be able to do this. In the Bible, name indicates character. Let's explore the character of this child through these names.

He is first of all the **“Wonderful Counselor.”** More literally, he is a wonder of a counselor. The word “wonder” is a word that is used in the Bible for the miracles accomplished by God. So the sense of this is that of a miracle-working counselor. Good counselors are extremely valuable because they can see what needs doing in the life of the one being counseled. Their advice is able to set a person on the right path in life. But we need more than that, don't we? It does no good to tell the alcoholic to stop drinking or the anorexic to just start eating, even though both pieces of advice are right. We need more. How would you like to go to a counselor who always gave exactly the right advice and was also able to change your heart to take the advice? He could not only tell the anxious person not to worry, but could perform the miracle of changing the anxious heart. That is what this child who was born on Christmas day is able to do. If you want Jesus to be your miracle-working Counselor, what you need is to submit to him and to trust him.

His name is also “Mighty God.” The word “mighty” is actually the Hebrew word for hero. Jesus is the hero who is God. Every culture has its heroes. There is something in our human psyche that needs heroes. Though our heroes today tend to come through athletics, for most of the history of the world a culture’s heroes have been those able to triumph militarily. Jesus is our military hero able to conquer all his enemies. But there is something odd about this military hero, seen in the fact that he is also called the “Prince of Peace.” From his birth he was surrounded by enemies. The first was King Herod, from whom Jesus’ parents were forced to flee to Egypt. During his earthly ministry, Jesus’ disciples wanted to call down the fires of judgment upon his enemies, but Jesus wouldn’t allow it. At the cross, his enemies seemed to have won, but still this military hero refused to take action. What kind of deliverer is he if he won’t take action? He is the Prince of Peace able to save his enemies by turning them into his friends. He is not only able to save Judah from the Assyrians, but also able to save Assyrians from the Assyrians. It’s a good thing he can do so, because by nature we are all Jesus’ enemies. Our Prince of Peace and our military hero is the same person. By dying for us, he delivers us from our enemies, the chief one of which is our own sin nature.

Jesus is also the “Everlasting Father.” This doesn’t mean that there is no difference between God the Father and God the Son. Rather, it is describing a characteristic that is true of Jesus. We all have a sense of need for a father to protect and provide for us. My older brother was born with an abnormality in both feet that needed surgical correction. My father investigated the best surgeon within reach of our home at that time up in northeast Alabama, and found a good surgeon in Atlanta. So many trips were made to Atlanta, about a four hour drive from our home in that pre-interstate time, that my four-year old brother was eventually able to tell you every turn to make. I always had the confidence that my father would have done anything within his power to provide for and protect his family. But his power was limited, and became more so in his waning years as he suffered from Alzheimer’s. And he is no longer with us, having passed away almost three years ago now. Jesus, by contrast, is an everlasting Father of unlimited power.

How is it that Jesus, our Restorer, will go about his work of establishing this peace? Verse 4 says that he will do it, **“as on the day of Midian.”** Jesus will bring his peace as God delivered his people from the Midianites in the days of Gideon. Do you remember that story? Gideon was the ruler in Israel who was told to reduce the size of his army before going into battle with the hordes of Midianites invading the land. Whoever heard of preparing for war through a reverse draft. Instead of calling up soldiers to fight, he busied himself sending home the soldiers who were ready to fight. Then he went to fight the Midianites with an army of the three-hundred God left to him. He was facing an army that was too vast to count. The author of Judges tell us that **“the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like**

**locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance”** (Judges 7:12). One camel could support several men, and since camels are so much larger than men, they would be easier to count. But not even the camels could be counted, so vast was this army. It didn't matter to the outcome. Through the power of God, a great victory was won that day. Jesus brings his peace and joy to us as on the day of Midian, only the forces of God were even smaller than the 300 left to Gideon. As even Jesus' closest disciples abandoned him, the army of God was reduced to one man hanging on a cross. But it was enough, for on this one was laid the sins of God's enemies, with the result that not only are we at peace with God, but more importantly, he is at peace with us.

### **CONCLUSION:**

As you're probably aware, the new *Star Wars* movie opened this weekend. A few months ago, I saw a television commercial for the new *Star Wars* videogame. It shows a man in an office building dutifully working away when the walls of his office begin to shake. He looks up to see an X-Wing craft hovering outside his window, piloted by his childhood friend. Then a second X-Wing rises up with an empty cockpit. Without hesitation, the man in the office grabs an office chair, hurls it through the glass window and jumps into the cockpit of his X-Wing and races off to face the evil Empire. He is connected back to his childhood.

I want to ask you to do something similar now. Break through the hard cynicism as so much “Ba-Humbug” and dare to believe that the stories really are true. Reconnect with the longings surrounding Christmas that were true in your childhood. Receive them as the whispers of God telling you that a child has been born who turns out to be the God-hero able to bring lasting peace and joy, able to light up the darkness of life and fill us with hope. He comes with surprising, satisfying and very expensive gifts. He comes to restore families and make permanent the satisfying relationships we have with those we love and who love us. And the future for all eternity is one in which it will only get better with each passing year. We know that because verse 7 says, **“Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.”** It will happen, not because I say so or because I or anyone else wants it to, but because **“The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this”** (v. 7). Listen to your inner longings and accept Jesus as the one who brings all these good gifts to us.