Merry Christmas!

*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

 John 1:12-13

Jesus was sent, first of all, to save the Jews, God’s chosen people. He was of the nation of Israel and those are the people He came to. However, John tells us that, for the most part, His people did not receive Him. This is a terrible shame, because He was the One they had been waiting for and He was the only one who could save them from their bondage to sin.

But some did receive Jesus for who He is and believed on Him for salvation. And, in accordance with the promise God gave to Abraham, not only the Jews but anyone who accepted Him would be saved. And this is what John is telling us is the result of Jesus being your Saviour.

When we believe on Jesus Christ as our one and only Saviour; as the one who has taken the punishment for our sins; then we are adopted by God as His very own sons and daughters. We can call Him Father just as Jesus does. This comes with all the blessings of having a perfect father. One who knows exactly what we need and when to give it to us.

Even more amazing is an instantaneous rebirth. When we sin, our spirit is separated from God. When our spirit is separated from our bodies, we are dead. So, when our spirit is separated from God we are spiritually dead. Once we accept Christ, our spirit is resurrected, it is reborn, it comes alive again through the power of the Holy Spirit; so we are then born of God.

I pray you have experienced spiritual rebirth. The first Christmas was a Spirit born as flesh; God the Son become man. He was born as flesh so that our spirit could be born again. Accept that gift; you will receive no better.

In Christ’s love

John

 12-25-22

Isaiah 8:16–9:7

As we study Bible prophecy, there are a few things to keep in mind that might help us. For one thing, it usually doesn’t go in order or follow a straight time line. From one verse to the next, or even within the same verse, there may be great spans of time. Each prophecy will usually point to one main event, but it will also allude to one or more other occurrences. And sometimes it speaks of something that will take place in the future as something that has already happened. It will do this because it is God’s word; and once God says something, you can count on it being done.

Sometimes prophecy is dependent on the response of Israel. As we read the Bible, we see many times where God told Israel to turn to Him or He would bring calamity upon them. We also see how often Israel didn’t listen and reaped the consequences. Some prophecies God gives do not depend on Israel’s response. These come because of God’s great love for His chosen people and for us. In our reading today, we have an example of this. God will bring a Saviour, in spite of our behavior.

In the verses just previous to our reading, God has spoken through Isaiah that while to some He is a sanctuary, to many in Israel and Judah He is “*a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over.*” This truth of God is applied to Jesus by the apostles, for example in 1 Peter 2:6-8.

*For this is contained in Scripture:*

*“Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone,
And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.”*

*This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve,*

*“The stone which the builders rejected,
This became the very corner stone,”*

*and,*

*“A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”*

For those who will not accept Jesus, the idea of God suffering and dying as He did is either unbelievable or just unacceptable. But for we who are believers, Jesus is a precious stone. One that we can cling to and not be swept away; One that we can hide behind and be safe. He is our strong tower and sanctuary. Comparing the New Testament application to the Old Testament prophecy, we can see that God and Jesus are one.

Throughout prophecy, there are terrifying warnings for Israel and for us. This is because God is perfectly holy; due to God’s nature and His very being, He cannot let sin slide. If He did, He would cease to be the God of the Bible. No matter how small the infraction, it is totally unacceptable to the infinitely holy God. Because of this, severe penalties must befall any who violate His precepts. In may seem counterintuitive, but God issues those dire warnings because He loves us.

He wants us to know how dangerous it is to stray from Him; so He warns us, He tells us straight up front. He constantly gives us chances to turn to Him. And that leads us to another marvelous attribute of our Lord’s prophecies: After much stern warning, He often gives us words of hope. All of this is because He loves us and wants us to follow the path of holiness that leads to eternal life.

In chapter 8 up to verse 16, Isaiah has been passing on the words given to him by God. In verse 16 he begins his own inspired commentary which includes what God’s people need to do, praise for God, and prophesying what God will do in the future. That is, what would be the future for Isaiah.

Isaiah is going to cling to the Bible as he has it; to Scripture. And he will share it with those who are disciples of the Lord. Isaiah will search for the Lord in Scripture and wait for Him. Isaiah must wait because the Lord has hidden His face from Israel. Israel has turned from the Lord and so the Lord has turned from Israel. But Isaiah knows that God is faithful and will not completely abandon His people, so he waits.

As we look at the world and this country, we can see how the people have abandon the Lord God. There is no doubt that He is hiding His face and giving people over to their sins. But we who are Christians must follow the lead of the prophet Isaiah. We cling to Scripture and we wait for God. But notice also that while Isaiah is waiting he is still doing the work God has called him to; and we must do the same.

Isaiah asks some searching questions regarding the advice the world gives. Why ask the advice of spiritists and mediums when with their answers they whisper and mutter? The King James Version says that they “peep”. These types of people are out there today as psychic readers or horoscopes (which they now call “astrographs”). They talk in circles or in generalities, they are unclear in what they predict. Why not go to Scripture that is proclaimed boldly and is the word of God?

Why try to talk with dead people to find out what is going on in the world of the living? They are dead, they don’t know. Their spirits may live, but they are either in paradise or in torment and have no connection to the world of the living. While these things are actually taking place today, it is more common for people to look within: Follow your heart, make your own truth. Again, this is folly. The Bible is clear that absolute truth exists and that our hearts are only evil continually.

Isaiah preaches, do not look elsewhere but the word of God. Those who look elsewhere have no light; because Jesus said “*I am the light of the world*”. What will happen to all those who seek their own way apart from the word of God? Isaiah says they will be hard-pressed and famished, they will be hungry (that is, spiritually hungry), in the end they will find nothing good in the earth because God will have turned them over to their own passions and their minds will become reprobate, devoid of the common grace of God.

We find Isaiah’s warning of consequences again in the book of Revelation. Verse 21 says they will be enraged and curse God. In Revelation chapter 16, three times during the terrible plagues of the end time the people blaspheme God because of the pain and darkness but will not repent. These people will be driven away into darkness forever.

Powerful words of warning to those who will heed them. Isaiah tells of awful consequences for those who will not turn to God. And these consequences are reenforced throughout the rest of Scripture. God’s justice must be carried out; His holiness must be maintained and even with the great love He has for us, God cannot deny Himself. He will carry out the punishment.

The first word in chapter 9 is “But” or “Nevertheless”. Here is the reprieve we need; here is the hope God gives to those of us who trust in Him. In these verses comes the promise of the Gospel; in these verses is Jesus; in these verses is Christmas.

The area of Galilee was contained within the land allotted to the two tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali. Along with all the rest of Israel, these tribes were punished for their lack of obedience to the Lord. The Lord had turned away from them so they were in darkness. But the Lord God Himself, because of His love for His people, would cause His light to shine there in Galilee. These people who lived in darkness, spiritual darkness, would see a great light; indeed, the Light of the world.

Isaiah’s prophecy came to pass with the birth of Jesus. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in the house of David in order to fulfill other prophecy. But He grew up in the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee and He conducted much of His ministry there. This fulfillment of prophecy is pointed out by Matthew in chapter 4, verses 12-17.

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:*

*“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
“The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light,
And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death,
Upon them a Light dawned.”*

*From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

The appearance of Jesus, was a great, bright, spiritual light that God sent, not only for Israel, but for all people. In Jesus, with His life on earth and death on the cross, God was able to maintain His justice and holiness, yet bestow mercy upon us and forgive us our sins. God’s love for us is beyond our understanding. We can only stand in awe of Him.

Notice that this is not some kind of mushy sentimental love that lets us get by with anything. The great light that God bestowed upon the world preached and He preached command and warning. We are called to repent; we are called to a changed life once we come to Christ. And we are warned that time is short; the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

We are now in a sort of in between time. The first Christmas has taken place and that Light of God shone brightly in the dark world. That Light still shines. But, the world is still dark. After all these years we still celebrate the birth of Christ; we still celebrate Christmas; and rightly so. Although the world is still in darkness, we have the opportunity to have that Light sent by God shine in our hearts.

When we accept Jesus as Saviour, we have accepted the first and truest Christmas gift ever offered. And then that Light is in us; and then through us, God will shine that Light into the rest of the world. What a glorious gift and privilege, that God would use sinners like us to build His Kingdom.

Now, as those people, many years ago, looked forward to the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that was fulfilled in Christ, we also look forward to Jesus coming again. And when He does, He will purge the darkness from the earth once and for all.

Even that promise is both a warning and a blessing. It is a warning to turn to Jesus because time is running out. When He comes back, those who have rejected Him will be driven into darkness for eternity. But it will be a blessing to those who are His; for we who have clung to Scripture and believed in the Christ; God’s remnant; God’s children; destined for eternal life.

Isaiah praises God because in Him is joy. Because of Christmas we have gladness of salvation and promise of eternal life with Christ. And we look forward to an increase of gladness with the second advent of our Lord. Isaiah tries to liken the happiness we will feel to some things we experience here in this life.

There is gladness when a hard-working farmer finally obtains a good harvest after all his work of planting and tending and caring for his crop. His family is provided for. There is gladness for the soldier when the battle is won. He has fought hard and survived, now he gains the spoils of war and can also provide for his family. We will experience a gladness when the battles of this life are over and we have persevered with Christ. We will reap a harvest of reward for our good deeds and work here on earth.

The fight will be over. As the warrior’s boots and blood-soaked cloak will no longer be needed, they are used as fuel for a fire during rest. We will rest from our labors here and all we do will no longer be vanity. Christ removes the yoke we carry and replaces it with His. His yoke is light and His burden is easy. He helps us to carry it.

In verse 6 we see both advents. Jesus came as a child on that first Christmas Day, giving us peace with God, rest from our work of attaining heaven, and the hope of eternal salvation. Then, when His second advent takes place, He will rule the world as sovereign King, fulfilling God’s promise to David that a descendent of his would sit on the throne forever.

The government of Jesus will be the last and it will be perfect and the light will then truly permeate the world. The darkness will be gone, both physical and spiritual. Life for us will be even better than it would have been if we remained in the Garden of Eden.

God has intervened in the world to save it; to save us from eternal destruction. Notice that last line of verse 7. *The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.* Only God has the power to do this; none of us can save ourselves. Only God can make a way to maintain His justice and have mercy on us at the same time. It is His love for us that drives Him to make a way.

Isaiah said the LORD “*will accomplish*” this. It was future for Isaiah. For us, the LORD “has accomplished” this in the first Christmas.

I hope and pray that you have a blessed and joyous Christmas. That you are able to spend it with loved ones and that the joy of Christ fills your hearts today. May He remain forefront in your minds, so that you may be grateful for the greatest gift of all.

Prayer

There is no doubt that You are almighty God and that Your word is true. The words You spoke through Isaiah and Your other prophets are true and fulfilled in Christ. How amazing to think, that the servants of God spoke of God the Son, when they prophesied a suffering and a conquering Saviour. Only Your great wisdom could conceive of a man suffering death in order to conquer it by rising from it. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God became man, to accomplish that victory.

We bless You, Lord, for that first Christmas, in a demonstration of Your great love and mercy You sent Your only begotten Son to live and to die for us. We bless You, Lord Jesus, for You perfectly carried out Your Father’s will in obedience to Him and in love for us. We celebrate Your birth in remembrance of what God has done for us; made an everlasting peace between God and man.

Now, Holy Spirit, be active in our hearts and minds as we celebrate the birth of our Saviour. As we share with others, may we remember what God shared with us. As we have joy with others, may we have joy in our risen Saviour. As we have hope for the well-being of others, may we cling to that sure hope we have in the Son of God. Thank You Father, for Christmas.

In Jesus’ name

Amen