

Surprised By Joy

Isaiah

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 8. As we did last Sunday, I wanted to preach this morning the message of Christmas. We're starting in chapter 8 just to set the context for chapter 9, a very familiar passage, one of the great prophecies of the coming of Christ, prophesied as Ted read from Isaiah 7 earlier. Isaiah wrote around 700 BC so these prophecies were made 700 years before the birth of Christ. This morning, we're going to be looking at Isaiah 8:16. We're going to read some selected verses in chapter 8 from 16 toward the end, and then chapter 9, verses 1 to 7. The title of the message is "Surprised By Joy." Surprised by joy. I borrowed that title from the title of C. S. Lewis's autobiographical account of his conversion. C. S. Lewis was an atheist and the coming of Christ into his life was something that seemed very unlikely given his upbringing, his background and the studies, but the impact of Christ coming into his life was summarized by those three words, surprised by joy; that when Jesus comes, he ushers in joy. He brings joy to those who are in despair. In this passage that we're going to look at, it's really a good description of what happens when Jesus comes as we're going to see as Isaiah is prophesying that he will be the advent of Messiah will be the advent of joy.

So let's read Isaiah 8, beginning at verse 16.

16 Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. 17 And I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him. 18 Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

Skipping down to verse 21,

21 They will pass through the land hard-pressed and famished, and it will turn out that when they are hungry, they will be enraged and curse their king and their God as they face upward. 22 Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be driven away into darkness.

1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. 2 The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them. 3 You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4 For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. 5 For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult, And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire. 6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. 7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You this morning for the opportunity to gather together and to gather around Your word and we confess our great need. Lord, we ask You that You might open the eyes of our hearts that we might see wonderful things from Your law and that seeing, we might repent and believe and obey. For the power and for the glory of Your Son, we pray in His name. Amen.

Surprised by joy. Martyn Lloyd-Jones often has stated that one of the marks of a believer ought to be joy; that when we come to Christ, when Christ comes into our life, we have received that which ought to give us joy. I mentioned before the word "grace, charis," actually is related to the word "joy." So when you receive grace, you receive that which gladdens the heart. So every recipient of grace ought to be marked by joy. It doesn't mean, not a kind of Pollyanna happiness that pretends everything's okay when it's not, but a kind of joy that surveys and takes in all of the data points and looking at everything honestly and evaluating everything in context concludes, "Joy ought to be what I feel." Because when you put everything, no matter what your suffering is, Paul makes it clear that these momentary light afflictions are producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison; that it's momentary; it's light. Heaven is coming so the Christian should be marked by joy.

The problem is we're not so often. Why is that? Well, for many it's because they have not yet come to know Jesus Christ. Jesus is not in your life so it's impossible to have true joy without Christ. But then for those who are believers, it's so easy to lose our joy and we find in this passage that the people of God are in despair, they've lost any sense of joy and that that same path that they have gone down that has led them to despair and hopelessness is a path that we, as believers, can go down and find ourselves in darkness

and gloom and despair. And it's the path of idolatry, that we're going to see that idolatry leads to despair but surrendering to Christ and turning back to true worship always ushers in joy. That's essentially the theme of the message and that that actually, that we will be surprised by how joyful we will be because it doesn't look like it's going to produce joy when we first look at it. It doesn't seem that our despair can really be helped by something like this and yet the reality is when we submit to Christ, when we worship him again with fully surrendered hearts, the inevitable result is joy, great joy.

So with that introduction, we're going to consider this topic under three points and the first is the inevitable outcome of idolatry. The inevitable outcome of idolatry. To understand this, let me give you some background about the people of God in Isaiah's day. The passage Ted read earlier from Isaiah 7 kind of sets this up because in Isaiah's day he prophesied during the reigns of various kings of Judah and he began his ministry at the death of Uzziah, that is what Isaiah 6 prophesied. It explains his call to ministry. It happened when he was at the temple in the year that King Uzziah died, he saw the Lord. He's called into the prophetic ministry while Uzziah's son, Jotham, and Jotham reigned for just a couple of years after, five years after his dad dies and then the next king is Ahaz. So early in Isaiah's prophetic ministry Ahaz ascends to the throne and he's the king that Isaiah went to in chapter 7 and said, "Listen, God's going to take care of you and the nation of Judah. If you don't believe me, ask for a sign." And God tells him to ask for a sign and he's so spiritual he says, "No, I'm not going to ask for a sign." When God tells you to ask for a sign, you ask for a sign. It was an incredibly defiant ridiculous thing for Ahaz to do, that's why Isaiah responded the way he did.

Ahaz was an ungodly man and he led a nation of ungodly people. They were experiencing personal and social, economic, political turmoil. The nation of Judah, which is the southern kingdom of the people of God, remember the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms after Solomon died, and it's the northern kingdom which retained the name of Israel, the southern kingdom was named Judah. The southern kingdom of Judah is where Jerusalem and the temple were and where the Davidic line ruled. Ahaz was of the Davidic line. He was a son of David. So God's blessing primarily on the southern kingdom because they are the ones who have the temple and they are the ones who are serving the Davidic king.

Well, what's happened now at this particular time in history is the northern kingdom of Israel and the kingdom right above them, the Arameans, have made an alliance and they have attacked the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah is under attack by their brothers in Israel and their allies, the Arameans, and they are scared and that's where the Lord sends Isaiah in chapter 7 to say, "Don't worry. They're not going to succeed. I'm going to take care of them." Both of them are going to be wiped out by the Assyrians, this other massive kingdom that was really the great political power and military power of the day. Well, all of this to say this was a time of great stress. I mean, imagine you're under attack, your country is under attack. You have the fear of the enemy hordes showing up at any time, then you have the economic hardship that comes from warfare because during warfare you don't have all your guys out tending the fields, producing the goods, and so everybody is just experiencing economic distress.

So they're looking at their lives, their lives are filled with pain and uncertainty and what we see is they don't turn to the Lord, they turn to their idols. That's what Ahaz does. They turn away from God and Isaiah basically, the message of Isaiah is summed up really, he comes to a people, Isaiah is sent by the Lord to a people who have outward external religion. You see this in chapter 1. If you read chapter 1, chapter 29, verse 13, God says in chapter 29, verse 13, "These people honor Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me." So they were characterized by faithful attendance at the temple, they were characterized by faithful offering of sacrifices according to the calendar. They are offering their sacrifices, they're offering their new moon offerings, they're doing all that they should do externally but their hearts are far from the Lord. In fact, in chapter 1 God basically says, "I wish you would stop bringing your offerings. I wish you would stop coming to My temple because it's a sham, it's a show, it's not real."

It's possible for us to find ourselves going through the motions and we're not worshipping God from the heart. The believer who turns aside to sin and who begins to go after his idols, idols of the heart, what happens when you turn away from the Lord, if you're not going to worship God with your whole heart, you will worship something. We're made for worship. Everybody worships. Every person. The atheist worships. The atheist worships man, he worships himself, he worships evolution, he worships all these other things. He puts his hope and trust in something other than God. People worship money. They worship pleasure.

We as Christians can find ourselves worshipping evil things, sexual sin, or even good things. We can want good things too much. You can want to have your children be godly too much in such a way that it's an idol; that you are so consumed with the fact that they might not follow the Lord that you stop following the Lord yourself. Now you don't think you are. You think you're being zealous for them but in reality what's happening is you're fretting, you're worrying, you're not trusting God. Anytime you want anything more, this is the way to know that an idol has happened in your heart, anytime you want anything more than you want to please the Lord, you are worshipping an idol. You want your children to be faithful to God so much that you stop being faithful to the Lord. You're anxious, you're fretting, you're manipulating them. You're trying to control them. You're trying to pressure them to follow God rather than speaking the truth in love and trusting the Lord.

You want a godly marriage. You want your husband to love you. You want your wife to love you. So because you want this, and that's a good thing, right? I mean, we should want godly marriages. We should want marriages that honor the Lord but you want it so much that you're willing to sin when you don't get it. When your husband doesn't love you, you treat him with unkindness, with harsh words, with cutting remarks. You're sinning because you wanted something in an idolatrous way and you didn't get it. The same thing with a husband that his wife isn't honoring him the way he thinks he should be honored so he mistreats her, he doesn't serve her, he doesn't love her. He wants something more than he wants to please God because if you want to please God more than anything, even when your children don't follow Christ, "I want to honor You as a

godly man or a godly woman should in this circumstance. What does that look like, Lord? What does it look like to trust You and please You in this circumstance? What dose it look like to be a godly husband with a wife who doesn't honor him? What does it look like to be a godly wife with a man who is not attending to her properly? What does that look like?"

I love the way Charles Hodges says it, some of the counseling videos we've been watching on Wednesday nights. If you want to please the Lord more than you want to breathe, that is true worship. I want to please the Lord more than I want to breathe. That's what the Christian who has been redeemed and been born again and now knows he's not doing it to earn anything from God, he's been saved by the grace of Jesus Christ, Jesus has done everything necessary to make me right with God and therefore now out of gratitude, I just want to offer my life as worship to him. Not to earn anything but because he's given everything.

Well, the point is when you stop worshiping God, when you become half-hearted in your worship, the inevitable outcome is idolatry and you see this played out in the nation of Israel. They're going to the high places and you can read about this in 2 Kings 16, you can read about the life of Ahaz and what you read there, I'll just mention it briefly, we're not going to turn there, is that Ahaz was an idolater. He did not trust the Lord, in fact, when the Arameans, remember I mentioned the Arameans and the nation of Israel have come and they're attacking him, the Lord sends Isaiah to say, "Don't worry. There's going to be a baby born and before he can eat, before he's even eating curds and honey, these two kings you're worried about are going to be wiped out. This child is going to be born." And apparently there was some kind of fulfillment of it initially that probably wasn't a virgin birth the same way but it was a young lady who wasn't yet married who then gets married and has a baby, or something like that, and then the ultimate fulfillment is Christ, a true virgin birth. Well, before this child is going to be old enough to eat normally, these two kings are going to be gone. Well, that wasn't good enough for Ahaz so Ahaz, he sends the emissaries to arrange a meeting with the Assyrian kingdom. He makes an alliance with Assyria, the ungodly, the wicked, because he trusts in, he's so concerned about the physical pressures in his life that he turns away from the Lord. We're told that he's such an idolater, he even offers one of his children, at least one of his children in the fire.

So idolatry when we don't worship God, we worship idols, and what is the inevitable outcome of idolatry? We see this now back to our text. The inevitable outcome of idolatry is seen in just the words that Isaiah piles upon one another here in this passage. Essentially, look at the words, this is what happens when you worship your idols. Look at verse 22, "Then they will look to the earth," you see, they're not looking to the Lord. They should be looking to God in their distress. They're hungry, they're famished but they cursed God, they turned away from the Lord, their circumstances have been hard and they haven't said, "I want to please You, Lord, even in this." They haven't sought the Lord. "Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be driven away into darkness."

That second word "darkness" is different than the first word and the ESV translates it, "they will be thrust into thick darkness." You read on down, verse 2, "The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land," you see the emphasis on darkness. Four times the word "darkness" and the English word "darkness" is there, well, three times "darkness" and once "dark," twice in verse 22, twice in chapter 9, verse 2. This is what happens. When you turn away from the light, the inevitable result is darkness.

When you don't worship God who is light, you will find yourself in darkness and distress, verse 22. Then the phrase, I'm reading in the New American Standard, "the gloom of anguish," in verse 22. "Behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish," then those two words are repeated again in chapter 9, verse 1, "there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish." Do you see that? The repetition of these terms, Isaiah is trying to describe for us the misery that comes when we turn away from the Lord and we don't worship him with all of our hearts. It is darkness.

We don't really experience darkness that much anymore. I mean, I'm talking about just naturally because we live in a suburban area and you go outside at night, there are lights everywhere. You know, when you go out in the country like those people that go camping, those crazy folks that do that in our church. We've got a number of them and you pray for them. But anyway, they go out there and they tell me that when you go out there, that it's really dark and you can see the stars a lot better if you get away from the city. Well, the reality is we don't really experience the full impact of darkness.

I remember one time when I was, Patti and I were just married, in our first year or two of marriage, I woke up in the middle of the night and, you know, I was going to run to the bathroom and so I'm making my way. Well, this particular night, the power was off and our door was closed, the power was off, and that meant the light from the alarm clock wasn't even there. You know, a pretty good bit of light comes off of your...remember the clock/radio thing. Now you young people, before you used your phone to wake up, we had things called clock/radios and the clock/radio had light coming off of it. Well, this time there's no light coming off the clock/radio so I get up and I'm trying not to wake up too much, I just want to wake up enough to take care of the business I need to take care of and get back to bed, right? So I'm making my way across the room and I walk to where I think the door is and I can't find the door. I'm reaching for the handle and I'm doing like this, and I don't know how long it was but I'm beginning to get a little concerned, "Where is this door?" I start finally making enough noise, Patti hears me, you know, doing like this, she jumps up, runs across the room, immediately hits the light switch. I mean, she finds it just like that. I'm over across in the corner. I mean, the door is here, I'm over in that corner, somehow I've gotten all the way over there.

Well, imagine if I could never have had someone turn on the light. What would it be like to grope in the darkness like that? To be even worse than going camping, going caving. People that go in those caves, that's really scary, and that you want to do that. No, seriously. But, I mean, to be in a cave where you can't have any light, you have no way to get out, you don't know where you are. Imagine that.

That's what Isaiah is trying to describe for us. Darkness, external darkness that begins pressing itself in. In fact, the words he uses are gloom and anguish when he says in verse 22, "behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish." So the distress is talking about the feeling that you have but particularly the word "gloom" is a word that describes the emotion of shadows falling upon you. It's the emotion that darkness brings. Do you know how you can feel gloomy like when the sun hasn't come out for four or five days, you just sort of feel down, the beginning of a kind of gloom? This is what he's talking about and when you're in the dark, the emotions begin to be worked on from the outside.

The word "anguish, the gloom of anguish," takes it even deeper. The word "anguish" means "to be pressed on," to have it pressing and the pressure being brought to bear so much that you have this inner energy that wants to get out. You know, because you're being pressed on so much, you feel like, it's kind of like when you're in a position, if you've ever had an MRI and if you're claustrophobic, I'm a little claustrophobic and I've had several MRIs now and when you have an MRI and they put you in for like 30-45 minutes, it's actually challenging. It's an opportunity to really grow spiritually while you're in that MRI because you can't move and you know you can't move and you have no power to be able to get out of that. If you start thinking about it, you start feeling that anguish that comes that you want to get out. You may have had one and they're great if you're distressed thankfully they give you a little button you push and they'll pull you out, right? But imagine you're in that darkness and you're feeling the distress, you're feeling the gloom and the anguish and there's no relief in sight. That's what he's describing. That's what idols bring. When you turn to anything and you worship it, it never delivers what it promises, it delivers darkness and distress and gloom and anguish. It promises something far different but that's the reality.

I mentioned Ahaz had gone to the Assyrians and he thought the Assyrians can deliver me from the Israelites in the northern kingdom, and they did. The Assyrians came in and they took care of the Arameans and they took care of Israel and they were no longer a threat, and then Assyria started stepping on the throat of Judah. The one they turned to became their great enemy and God had to do a great deliverance to help them in Hezekiah's day, even, and the kings that followed Ahaz.

But this darkness, distress, gloom and anguish were something that were experienced. It's interesting, in fact, when he says in verse 9, "There will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish," and he gives us a specific location of people who were in anguish that the readers could think about and understand. We need to understand this, in verse 1 when he says, "there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt," what is this Zebulun and Naphtali? What's going on here? Isaiah is speaking to the southern kingdom. I mentioned Israel divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah. The southern kingdom had two tribes, the northern kingdom had 10, and the northern kingdom, the farthest north tribes of all were Zebulun and Naphtali. They were two of the sons of Jacob, remember Jacob had 12 sons, the 12 sons become 12 tribes. Judah, one of the sons, later becomes the line of Christ and they're in

the southern kingdom, David's line. But Zebulun and Naphtali are the far north. When Isaiah writes this, when Isaiah is prophesying, one of the things that happened immediately was the Assyrians were dominating already Zebulun and Naphtali. It was already their possession. They had come in and they took it over right away and so when he mentions this, his readers know Zebulun and Naphtali are under Assyrian domination and that was a bad place to be.

The Assyrians were one of the most brutal people of all time. The brutality of the Assyrians was legendary. Remember the book of Jonah? Now Jonah was about 100 years, about 130, actually more like 150 years before Isaiah and remember what Jonah didn't want to do, where he didn't want to go? He didn't want to go and preach the Gospel to the Assyrians in Nineveh because the Assyrians were so wicked that he did not want them to have any pardon from the Lord. That same people is now ruling over Zebulun and Naphtali.

Just to give you an idea, they were masters of psychological warfare. The Assyrians when they would move into an area to try to conquer it, their brutality was legendary. If a city held out for them, we have this in one of the annals of one of the early kings, a city that held out against them, they skinned alive all of the elders of the city, let them die as a result of being skinned alive. They would impale people on poles as witnesses to what happens to those people, so people alive, dying impaled on poles. "This is what happens to you if you resist us, the mighty Assyrians." These were the people that were now treading down former Israelites or Israelites in Zebulun and Naphtali.

So that is powerful imagery. So you think about darkness and anguish and despair. These people were living it, completely helpless. It's something that's hard for us to relate to as Americans who have been born free. Some of you were born other places, maybe you can relate to this more in your own experience, but as Americans, we don't really fear being oppressed or if someone comes and does something to us, we know that justice will be done; that we can call the police, we can take it to court, somebody will protect us. We can call the police if they're trying to hurt us. But if you live in a place where you can't call the police, there is no deliverance from oppression. Think of the anguish that that produces in the soul. You know, live under the tyranny of Nazism, for instance, what it must have been like to be in Europe in the 1940s, the wickedness of the Nazis, to see their barbaric behavior, their violence, and to be powerless to do anything.

That's what he's describing but what he's telling us, how this applies to us is, listen, we may not have to worry about that at least for the time being in our country, socially, politically, but every time that you or I submit to an idol, we invite this kind of tyranny because idols always oppress. Even the good things that we want when we want them too much, these desires oppress and distress and bring gloom and anguish and agony and despair. That is why we must flee idolatry.

I mentioned you want your spouse to love you and so you make that your goal rather than pleasing the Lord, and so everything that you do is calculated to produce a change of behavior in the person and the reality is you and I can never change anyone. So you labor

and labor and labor and you're putting all of your energy in that and you're getting nothing in return and you're wanting it more and the desire is growing and then you are being oppressed by the desire. You're consumed by it and not able to love and serve others, not able to have joy. The reality is God gives us a joy that you can be a joyful Christian woman if your husband doesn't love you. You can have the joy of Jesus Christ and you will know it in some ways that ladies whose husbands do love them better don't know because no matter how deep the pit you find yourself in, Jesus is deeper still, and you run to Christ.

Idols oppress, they lead us into darkness. Some of you are feeling that today. You may be in anguish, secret pain that you've not shared, emotional agony, and it may be due to this very fact, there's something in your life that ought not be there. Well, the good news is Jesus is able to deliver you. That brings us to the second point. The first point, the inevitable outcome of idolatry; the second point is the improbable impact of grace. The improbable impact of grace. I say improbable because of the circumstances. The gloom is so great, I mean it's so hopeless for Zebulun and Naphtali. I mean, seriously, the people that read this for the first time and even those afterwards thinking about, man, they were in terrible distress and, in fact, after the Assyrians came in and overran them, it just kind of wiped them out. They were no longer any semblance of Israel until well after the return from Babylon.

But he says, "there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt," that is, that he's saying God, because they had turned away from him, God had turned away from them, and he treated Zebulun and Naphtali with contempt, it means he treated it as a light matter, a trifle, not even concerned about it. In fact, there's a contrast here when he says he treated it with contempt, "but later on He shall make it glorious." Formerly he treated it like nothing, inconsequential, light, total unimportance. When he says make it glorious, remember the word "glory" in Hebrew, the word "kavod," means "heavy and weighty." The glory of God is the impact that he makes upon us; his attributes being revealed; his glorious attributes being made known. The impact it has on us, that's glory. It's value. It's treasure. The New Testament word for "glory" is that too, "to value something; to esteem something of great value." So he says, "Formerly He treated with contempt but in these latter days, He's going to make it glorious. He's going to make it the most wonderful place in the world, the most valuable place in the world, Zebulun and Naphtali."

What is he talking about? Turn with me to Matthew 4:12, "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.'" When you read the Gospels carefully, you see that Jesus, he spent the overwhelming majority of his time in his ministry in Galilee far from Jerusalem. He only made trips down to Jerusalem

basically around the feasts. He did miracles when he was there, he taught when he was there, but most of his ministry was far to the north in the land of Galilee, the Jews up there. This was to fulfill what God had told us, God was going to show his amazing grace in the most unlikely places.

Do you know what town is in Zebulun? A little town of Nazareth. Jesus was raised in Nazareth in the land of Zebulun. Can you imagine what it would be like to see that young man, interacting with him just in daily life, watching him when he hits his thumb with a hammer, the difference between him and everybody else. The way he treats his mother. The way he treats people who mistreat him. The wisdom. Remember he has astounded the teachers, the Pharisees, the priests when he was 12. Man, the light is bright in Nazareth. Then his main base of ministry was Capernaum. His family moved there as he does here, that's where he found Peter and John, by the sea. That was his main base of operations. He went out from there.

So you see God, think about this, God is going to come, the God of heaven is going to come to the earth, where is he going to come? I mean, think about that. Really forget that you know it already, the answer. Where would you think the Lord would come? I mean, if I was guessing I would have thought, you know, Rome? Athens? Washington, DC? I mean, there wasn't a Washington, DC then, right? He came and he did most of his ministry in this tiny little area of Zebulun and Naphtali. The grace of God, and what that tells you is this, I think what the Lord is telling us is the places that are the darkest are the places God loves to shine his light the brightest. So that means if you're here and you don't know Jesus Christ, God is inviting you to himself. You say, "My life is too ugly. My sin is too great. He can't possibly accept me. If you knew what I had done." No matter what you have done, no matter how black your sins are, "Though your sins be as scarlet, I'll make them as white as snow." God loves to show his glory, to shine his brightest light in the darkest places. Paul said, "I am the chief of sinners. That's why God saved me." You may feel like you're the chief of sinners, good news, Jesus saves people who think they're the chief of sinners. Come to him today.

You may be a believer and you're realizing that you've become distant, the Lord is far from you and that you have despair in your life and anguish and gloom because you've turned away from the Lord. The message to you is draw near to God and he will draw near to you. You say, "I shouldn't have turned away." No, you shouldn't have but draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Turn away from your idols. Cry out to him. He's a God who loves to show himself even in this area that you have turned over to sin, that you have messed up your life. What can he do with that? He can somehow make that area glorious. Though there are scars, the scars will be glorious. He shall make it glorious, Galilee of the Gentiles.

Now it's important to note, I say the surprise, it's improbable because of the location but also because of the means, the location of where the ministry happened was improbable but the way it happens. How do you get your darkness and how does it become light because that's what happens. We saw darkness and gloom, now you see in verse 2, "Will see a great light. The light will shine on them." Then verse 3, "You shall increase their

gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil." You see the equal, he's laying term upon term again to say, "Look what happens when the light comes. It's joy. It's gladness."

The key thing is the turning point is explained in verse 4. How do you move from darkness to light? From gloom and anguish to gladness and joy? Verse 4, "For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian." What needs to happen, the only way that you can move from the gloom and darkness and your bondage to your idols is Jesus must act on your behalf. You can't clean yourself up. It's not saying, "Hey, you now clean yourself up and come to Me." No, he's saying, "Come to Me as you are. I must break the rod of the oppressor. You cannot." But you must come to him. You must surrender to him. He breaks the yoke. He breaks the staff. He breaks the rod of the oppressor.

I love this when he says, "The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian." It's so important that we look at every word we read in the Scriptures. Why does he say that, the battle of Midian? What's he talking about? Midian is talking about Gideon. Isn't that cool, it rhymes actually. I just realized that the other day, Midian and Gideon. So you can remember who Gideon defeated, he defeated Midian, the Midianites. The story of Gideon in Judges 6 is really something amazing and it begins when Gideon, the Midianites, this large nation around Israel, is oppressing the Israelites. They're coming in, they're plundering them regularly. Like the harvest happens, they come and they take all their stuff. It's like, "Hey, thank you for getting your harvest together. We're taking it now." They beat people. They rape. They pillage. They take the stuff away. Well, Gideon is at the beginning of chapter 6, he's in basically a hole in the ground because he's trying to hide from the Midianites and he's beating out some flour. He's threshing. Where you normally would be trampling wine, he's threshing wheat because he doesn't want the Midianites to see him.

So here he is threshing wheat in a hole in the ground because he's scared of the oppressors and an angel appears to him and says, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior." And I think Gideon must have been like this because he's in a little area, he's by himself, he must have thought, "Who are you talking to?" "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior." "Valiant" could be translated "mighty." In fact, the word "mighty" is the same Hebrew word as we're going to look at in a minute when we see "mighty God." The same word. "The Lord is with you, O mighty warrior." Gideon basically argues with the angel, "Listen, who am I? I'm the least of my family. My family is the least of my tribe. You've got the wrong guy. There is something happening, there's a mix-up. I'm the most unlikely deliverer."

Not only is he weak, he has no faith. The whole thing about putting out the fleeces, remember? The reason that's there is not to tell you and I how to find out God's will. That is absolutely not the case. It is to show you how appalling his unbelief is. God tells him, "I'm going to deliver Israel from Midian through you because I'm with you," and Gideon says, "I'm not sure I've heard You correctly," and he puts out the fleece one day, and then

he puts out the fleece the other day, and the amazing grace of God to keep revealing himself to this faithless spiritual weakling.

Well, Gideon gets an army together. He sends out the call, "God has told me to fight." 32,000 men show up. The Lord whittles the number down to 300 and they fight a combined army of the Midianites and the Amalekites, two massive armies, 300 people, and God fights on their behalf. They shout. They blow the trumpets. They break the jars. They have the fire in the jars. They break the jars and the Midianites and the Amalekites turn on one another and kill each other and just annihilate themselves. The most improbable person, the most improbable deliverance.

He says that when the light comes into your darkness, it will be the most improbable in the most improbable way. So he says that and then he follows it up because he says, "What's going to happen is you're going to be delivered from this incredible gloom and despair by a little baby. A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us. He will not appear to be anything of consequence." Ask the shepherds when they went to the stable. They find him lying in a feeding trough. Ask the wise men when they come a few months later, nobody even knows he's been born. He appears to be nothing of consequence. Ask the people of Nazareth who wonder even at the amazing character but can't imagine that Joseph and Mary's son could be the Messiah. The most improbable, unlikely. "He had no stately form or majesty that we should be drawn to Him," Isaiah 52, and yet this child is the one who brings God's grace and ushers in joy. He brings God's light, he ushers in deliverance. He brings God's light and ushers in joy and the essential way that it happens is in the most improbable way.

You are in bondage. You are in despair. The way out, you want something and so often we come to God because we're in bondage, we're in despair because we don't have what we want. Many people make professions of faith because they want God to give them a godly wife or they want God to give them victory over sin, they want God to give them whatever it is, and they're really just bargaining with God. "I want this, Lord, supremely and I'm willing to worship You in an outward and external way," just like the people of Isaiah did, "if I can have that." God doesn't deal with that kind of thing. He's far too good and kind. He doesn't want to help us worship our idols. What he does is he wants to be our all-in-all and everything that we actually truly want that we don't even know we want. So in one sense, he will not give you what you want but in the truest sense, he gives you what you really want but don't know that you want. That's the way he works.

Now when you think you want this, you look at your life and you see it like they did, maybe there is turmoil all around it, there is brokenness all around it, there is darkness all around it. There is so much wrong, how can anything good be made out of this? And the message is whatever you're wanting, the answer is submit to Jesus Christ. Bow down before the Lord Jesus. "That's not going to help me. That seems so improbable. That can't make the difference. That can't usher in joy." Yes, it can. In fact, it's the only thing that can. No matter how dark, no matter how bleak, the answer begins with, "Lord, I want to submit to You." If you don't know Jesus Christ today, the answer for you is crying out to him right now in your heart right now, "Lord, I want You to save me. I want You to take

my life and make it what You want it to be. I think I want all of these things but I surrender those things and set them aside. What I want is Christ. So I'm willing to turn from everything else and just make Jesus my focus but I'm going to need Your help. I can't break the rod of the oppressor. I can't beat down these idols but I surrender." If that's your heart, I'm telling you, this most improbable person is a mighty Deliverer. He is a mighty Savior. He will beat back everything in your life.

Now he's going to do it, first of all, he's going to deliver you from the kingdom of darkness and bring you to his own kingdom and then throughout your life he's going to keep extending his kingdom and his reign in your life. That's his plan for you and me, is to show us idols and to have us lay them down; to show us areas of darkness and despair and have us lay them down and receive his light and his joy and to keep spreading it throughout our life, and it doesn't mean that things are going to be great like people tell you, "Your best life now." No, God is not into that. It's completely wrong-headed and upside down. Your best life, if your best life is now, you are of all people most to be pitied. Your best life is in heaven but your better life is by realizing that whatever you think is your best life is wrong. Your better life is to submit to Jesus Christ and let him call the shots and be content to say, "Lord, what I want more than I want to breathe is to be pleasing to You because of what You've done for me."

Third point. The first point, the inevitable outcome of idolatry, the improbable impact of grace and, thirdly, the indescribable greatness of Christ, chapter 9, verse 6. Why should you submit to him? Anything else is insane. This is who he is. "This little child that seems so improbable, let me tell you what His name shall be called," Isaiah says. His name, his character, the essence of who he is described in these four marvelous titles. So four subpoints, four titles. This is the character of his rule. If you submit to him, this is what you will experience. You will find that he is a Wonderful Counselor. A Wonderful Counselor. I mean, counselor, someone you consult for guidance. They advise you after deliberating and hearing what your circumstance is, they advise you. Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor. In fact, "wonderful" means, it's a word which is used throughout the Old Testament to speak of miracles and marvelous things that produce astonishment. It's used early on in Exodus 15:11 to speak of God working wonders. After the exodus, all those amazing miracles in Egypt and culminating with the Red Sea deliverance. That is marvelous. That is wonderful. Jesus counsels just like that. When you get counseled by Jesus Christ, what you end up saying is, when you submit to it and you obey it, "That is amazing! That's exactly what I needed!" It doesn't look like it at first. He says, "Cast down your idols." And we say, "No, I don't want to. I can't live without my idols." He says, "Cast down your idols. Trust Me instead." You cast down your idols, you trust him instead and you say, "The most precious and wonderful thing I've ever done is listen to Jesus in that area. He set me free."

He's a Wonderful Counselor. In fact, when we do biblical counseling here at the church, our goal should always be in our minds consciously, "My goal is to help this person come to the Wonderful Counselor and to listen directly to the Lord Jesus Christ." That's our goal. We're simply beggars telling other beggars where we found bread. "Listen, I'm hungry and the place that I found bread is Jesus and that's where you need to go."

Wonderful Counselor, but he's not just the Wonderful Counselor, he's also the Mighty God. He, himself, this little baby is going to be God. Here it is in the Old Testament. He's the Mighty God. I love this word "mighty." I mentioned this is what the angel spoke to Gideon. It's a word which is used throughout the Old Testament to speak of powerful hunters, warriors, a champion, a victor. It pictures someone who is powerful and skillful but who also takes the initiative, like a soldier in battle who is surveying the scene, knows exactly what needs to be done and has the courage to do it, and the ability to execute it. History is strong with people like this that knew what needed to be done and did it. This is the Mighty God. He surveys the situation. He has all the ability, all the power, and he's not disengaged. He's assessing, surveying, and he's willing to act.

So you come to him and you submit to him and you find that you have a Wonderful Counselor, you have a Mighty God, but that's not enough, you need to know he's also an Eternal Father. The Son of God is also the Father. I think it's true he's using this term partly as Father is one of the words that just means benevolent protector but it's also telling us that there is a oneness between the Son and the Father, something of the Trinity even here. This one to be born will also, because Jesus, what did he say when he was going throughout his ministry in Galilee? "He who has seen Me has seen," who? "The Father. If you want to know what the Father is like, look at Me. That's what He's like." The Father is benevolent protector. The messianic King will come and care for his people the way of a father. He's saying as Psalm 103 says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."

He will not only be a Mighty God and a Wonderful Counselor, tells you what you need to do, who acts on your behalf, he will be a compassionate, caring, loving parent. The most compassionate. The most caring. The most understanding. We see this in other images in the New Testament. He will be a high priest who sympathizes with us, feels what you feel. In fact, that's why he became a man, one of the reasons was that he might, according to Hebrews 2 and Hebrews 4, he might be able to sympathize with us, feel what we feel.

But he's not just a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Eternal Father, he's also the Prince of Peace. Prince, a ruler. It can mean a king, a captain, a governor, a military commander, a chief, a chieftain, or a prince. So this is the one when he comes to rule, when he comes as a conqueror, he ushers in peace. Shalom. The biblical word is so rich. It doesn't just mean absence of conflict, it means the fullness that comes during times of peace. The fullness and wholeness and sense of utter and complete well-being. Think about what it must have been like to have lived in Nazi Germany, let's say Holland, in the '40s and then been there in the '60s, 20 years later to compare the difference. That's just a tiny inkling of what it is like to have the Prince who brings in peace because the reality is when you don't know Christ, you don't have peace, you don't have blessing, you don't have fullness, but when you submit to him, submit to his rule, he ushers in this kind of peace. The conflicts within stop. Then you can actually want the things that he wants in the right way. You can want your children to obey Christ. You can want a godly husband but you can do it with an attitude of peace and submission, a sense of wellness that even if this never happens, I'm going to be okay because I have Christ.

That's what he wills for us and that's joy. You see, that's where joy comes. When you have all these things, how can you be unhappy? I mean, life comes and we get sad for a little while but when we put things back in perspective, when you take whatever situation it is, if you make it your goal to make a beeline to the cross and to bow down to Christ, it will take some time sometimes, things happen, I mean, when we really go through grief it takes month, sometimes it takes years, there are things we're going to have to deal with for periods of time, but the answer is go to Christ and submit to him and keep submitting to him and he will bring in joy. Where there was gloom and anguish, contempt, he will make it glorious. The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we praise You for the glorious salvation that You have made known to us in Jesus Christ. We come thanking You that You are a God who has found a way to pardon sinners, to cleanse idolaters, people who were Your enemies, who as the people in Isaiah's day were cursing You. We may not outwardly curse You but, Lord, in our hearts whenever we worship things more than we worship You, we are cursing You. Forgive us, God. We thank You that You have sent Your Son to deliver us, that He is everything and more that we need. We pray for those that are here today who do not yet know Christ that today they might truly surrender to Him and that they might be surprised by joy. And Father, we pray that every believer in this room who is wrestling with various idols, that You might grant us grace to even today turn from them and tomorrow and next week and next month, keep showing us things, areas we need to repent in, and show us the joy that comes from submitting to such a glorious King. We pray this in His name. Amen.