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Sermon Series: *Sing in Exultation*, No.2

Cheer Our Spirits

December 12, 2021

Isaiah 8:18-9:7 [NIV]

Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.

¹⁹ *When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?*

²⁰ *Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.* ²¹ *Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God.* ²² *Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*

^{9:1} *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –*

² *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

³ *You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.*

⁴ *For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.*

⁵ *Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.*

⁶ *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.*

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ *Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.*

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

²⁷ *"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

²⁸ *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

We're starting with the Isaiah passage, if you'd like to turn there with me today. The book of Isaiah, the end of Chapter 8 and the beginning of Chapter 9.

As I'm sure some of you were, when I was growing up, I was a fan of the TV show *Hee Haw*. Starring Roy Clark and Buck Owens, it was sort of a country-western / music / comedy / variety / sketch show – very corny, very goofy and mindless, really.

And I loved it.

I happened upon a re-run of one a couple years ago, so I introduced Annette to it.

She did not love it.

Anyway, one regular segment on the show featured four wailing drunks singing about how hard life was for them, and the chorus they sang, in between the verses that spelled out their problems, was:

Gloom, despair and agony on me.

Deep, dark depression. Excessive misery.

If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all.

Gloom, despair and agony on me.

That memory came to me this week because of one word in that Isaiah text there: gloom.

Gloom.

What is gloom?

The dictionary gives as synonyms for *gloom* these words: despair, dejection, unhappiness, hopelessness and despondency – among others.

When there is gloom in your life, it's like there is a dark cloud hanging over your head that you cannot get rid of: it follows you around.

It's like "sadness plus" time.

Many around the world have fallen into gloom these past months due to COVID and all that's happened because of it.

Gloom turns people inward and makes the world close in around us, isolating us and allowing gloom to multiply itself in our lives.

Gloom can cause a person to think that no one has had it harder than they have, and so no one could ever understand their plight and their suffering.

But, of course, that's not at all true.

There is no new pain under the sun. People before have felt what we feel.

In fact, gloom was very present in Scripture, and it was found in Israel – in God's chosen people. At times it was widespread, even affecting the whole nation.

Isaiah speaks of this.

Isaiah foretold the judgement of God upon Israel in his chapters seven and eight here, and at the end of Chapter Eight, beginning in verse 21, he sums up all that will happen to the people. He writes, "*Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*"

It's a dark picture, and it all came true just a couple hundred years later when the Assyrians invaded the areas of Zebulun and Naphtali.

That Assyrian King who conducted the invasion, Tiglath-Pileser, was well known for bringing suffering and hunger and destruction and loss in his invasions, and

so it became, just as Isaiah predicted, a time of deep darkness and gloom for the people of Israel – in the *physical* sense.

But well beyond that, there was deep *spiritual* darkness and gloom in Israel too, since the very reason they were invaded was because they had turned away from God and turned instead to idols – to gods of wood and stone – to help and save them.

And, of course, those “gods” did not show up when they were needed the most.

Isaiah predicted gloom, despair and agony would come for God’s people, and, as usual, he was right.

But, Isaiah did not end his prophecy there. He also had good news to tell.

No one ever likes to hear that there’s a problem. But don’t you love it when, if someone has to tell you about a problem, they also offer you a solution to it?

Isaiah did that for Israel, and it is in the very next verse.

“There is gloom to come,” Isaiah says, “but it won’t last forever.”

In chapter 9, verse 1, he writes, *“Yet there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. As God humbled Zebulun and Naphtali in the past, in the future He will honor Galilee.”*

And through the rest of the beginning of Chapter 9 Isaiah speaks of the Messiah to come.

This is one of the most renowned passages predicting Jesus’ arrival: the prophecy of the Savior who will lift the gloom of God’s people.

And notice that the gloom that arrived through the invasion and overtaking by a godless foreign king will be lifted by a just and righteous king.

There will be a change in government, you see?

Their land will no longer be shrouded in darkness, both physical and spiritual. When this new king comes, verse 1 there says, there will be light.

Verse 2 declares there will be rejoicing where once there was lament.

Under this new king, verse 5 says, there will be no more war, and so no equipment for war will be needed anymore.

All because one in the line of David, Israel’s greatest King, will come to rule. (verse 7)

He will govern justly and honestly.

And He will do this forever – not just for a season.

This king’s righteous rule will last for all time.

Back in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, the laundry detergent ALL was advertised as being the “stain-lifter.”

Well, Isaiah says this King that would come will be the “gloom-lifter.” He would lift up God’s people in every way.

And how will He do that?

Isaiah says there in verse 4, this coming king will *“shatter the yoke that burdens the people, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.”*

The yoke that burdens people.

Of course, readers in Isaiah’s day knew exactly what a yoke is. Everyone saw them and many used them all the time.

You and me? Not so much.

This isn’t the yolk in the middle of an egg.

This is that wooden piece that sits across the shoulders of an ox or two and that attaches them to the tool: the plow or cart or whatever they’re pulling.

The yoke is what attaches us to our burden – our load.

A big reason people feel gloom, no matter who they are, is because they feel hopelessly overloaded. They feel overburdened and are unable to see how they can ever get out from under the load they’re carrying.

It’s a hopelessness that you can’t see your way past.

And, of course, this would be the case for a people, like Israel, who had walked away from God, who had trusted in their own power, and who then had been overtaken by a foreign nation and driven into submission.

“Without power of our own, without strength, without weapons, without influence, without friends, and then with all of these yokes – these bars and burdens of servitude placed upon us by this new king, how can we ever again be our own people?”

That would be an enormous burden which would certainly feed gloom.

But Isaiah specifically announces that a king is coming who will remove the tyrant’s yoke. With this new king in charge, God’s people will no longer be forced to bear and to pull oppressive, crippling burdens.

There will come a freedom from those, and that will lift their gloom.

That’s how Israel read Isaiah, and that hope of a national, physical freedom captured the Jews to the point that it fed their misconception of *messiah* as being only a political leader. That’s why they wanted Him to come so badly. They wanted a yoke-less nation, you see? They wanted national independence and to be free from all foreign control and influence.

And who doesn’t?

Israel equated *messiah* with earthly political freedom.

The thing is, though, that God had bigger ideas for Messiah than just a free earthly Israel.

He had bigger ideas about this yoke business, and we see Jesus speaking directly about it in our Matthew passage there – Matthew, Chapter 11.

Jesus speaks to this, not regarding earthly politics, but rather in spiritual terms.

The yoke that the Promised One actually came to lift was one of a spiritual nature to make people spiritually free.

You see in Jesus’ day, the Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees, enlarged and then used the Mosaic Law to place lots of heavy, legalistic burdens on people. That’s why people spoke often of the “yoke of the Law,” and how very heavy it was! If you wanted to be in right relationship with God, you had to bear a very heavy yoke.

Jesus announces here, though, that His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

Now, notice that there is still a yoke to be worn. Being in right relationship with God still requires a yoke. Unlike many seem to think today, there is no sense of

free-for-all as it relates to having a right relationship with God.

Jesus, though, makes that yoke and burden lighter on us because He has joined us beneath its weight. He pulls alongside us, and in his death and resurrection He has already pulled the lion's share of the load.

It's in that way that Jesus is a totally different sort of King.

You see, most Kings put burdens on their people so they don't have to carry the burdens themselves. That's what Israel experienced when invaded and captured.

Frankly, it experienced it under its own kings as well.

Which is precisely what makes Jesus so different!

Jesus is the King who puts no burden on His own people that He has not carried himself either *before* them, *beside* them or entirely *for* them.

Most kings see no value in the weak or troubled, so they, either intentionally or consequentially, push them to the side.

Isaiah says, however, that Israel's Messiah will never do that. He's the One who will not break a weak reed or stick. He will not snuff out a flickering candle (Isaiah 42:2-4). In fact, this king to come will go out of His way to help bear the burden of even the weakest of His own.

He takes our yoke upon Himself, you see?

And not in just some temporary, political, earthly way.

Jesus does this where our relationship with God is concerned.

Jesus paves the way for us to be a part of God's eternal Kingdom.

And He doesn't make it impossible for us. He doesn't present us with hoop after hoop for us to jump through.

Because of Jesus sharing our yoke and bearing our burden, we don't have to be concerned about invasion. We belong to a Kingdom far beyond anything of this earth.

In fact, we have been adopted into the very family of God!

You might say Jesus has pulled out the chair for us so we can sit at God's own table as one of His own.

The King who invites and adopts and carries and lifts for the sake of His people.

This is the King Isaiah said would come.

This is the Kingdom He'd bring.

This is the love and care that He would practice.

This is how different Jesus is from every other king. And this is why when this King comes, as Isaiah puts it, God's people will have no more gloom.

No more gloom!

No more unbearable burdens!

No more yokes that crush us!

Not even disaster, not even death, can harm us.

We belong to a King who invites us to come to Him and rest in Him.

He brings us the opposite of gloom, in fact.

And what is that?

At least one hymn writer, all the way back in the early 1700s, termed it "cheer."

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel."

"O Come, thou Dayspring..." That's another word used for Jesus that means the dawn – the rising Sun.

O Come, thou Dayspring, come and *cheer our spirits* by your advent, by your arrival, here.

"Disperse the *gloomy* clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight."

In Jesus' coming, you see, gloom is replaced with cheer – because He is the great King,

the good King,

the eternal King,

the King who invites us to Himself,

the King who has joined us beneath our yoke.

He invites us to give our burdens to Him,

to rest at his side,

and to even sit at His table.

What a remarkable king!

What a gift to be a part of His kingdom.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*

Benediction:

In these difficult days for our commonwealth, for our people, may Jesus be Immanuel – God with us.

And may we, His people, be His presence, such that even in tragedy,

God would be seen and known;

He would draw the lost to Himself;

and He would cheer the spirits of His people.