



Advent

(Week 2/4) Hope: The Promise of a Saviour

Small Group Discussion Questions

Connect *Plan and pray for opportunities to share the good news of God's salvation with people in your life.*

Warm-Up

1. As a child, what did you hope for most at Christmas time? *What are you more likely to hope for today?*
2. Why do you think there has been an 'erosion of hope' in Australia in recent years?

Read Isaiah 9:1-7

3. When someone is facing a difficult time, do people ever have a tendency (even a well-meaning one) to try 'reframe' the situation by downplaying it, sugarcoating it, or spinning it? *Is this helpful?*
4. According to Isaiah, what is the condition that the people of God are currently walking in?
5. How serious is the 'darkness' that they are in the thick of? Was any of it of their own doing?
6. How does this contrast to the future that God is promising *through Isaiah*?
7. Why do you think that Isaiah describes this good news as a light shining in the darkness?
8. Have you ever felt trapped in the (physical) dark before? How did you feel when light broke?
9. Has there ever been a time in your life that felt dark? Did knowing Jesus make a difference?
10. What type of King is the hope of Isaiah dependent on? (cf. have a look at his titles and explain them.)
11. What is the shape of his Kingdom? (cf. look for all of the various descriptors for this future.)
12. How is it clear that this type of hope is only possible through what the Lord will accomplish?
13. What do you think most people hope for today? What gives them confidence for this hope?
14. Why is it a relief to know that the greatest hope that we can know is not dependent on us?

Read Matthew 4:12-21

15. What has just happened to John? Where does Jesus now withdraw to?
16. What is significant about where Jesus goes? What does Matthew want us to join?
17. If Jesus is the long-awaited King, the light shining in the darkness, who is this good news for?
18. What is the darkness that Jesus will overcome? How has Jesus overcome this darkness?
19. Why does looking back to the cross and resurrection give us confidence about Jesus' return?
20. If the hope that Jesus brings is a gift, how do we receive it?
21. Has there been a time when you found it difficult to wait? What helped you to wait?
22. Is the hope that Jesus brings require a response? According to Jesus, what is that response?

Apply *How can waiting for Jesus' return be a way to train you more-and-more in hope?*

Pray *Saving God, we thank you that Jesus is the promised Saviour and therefore the source of our ultimate hope. Please help us to rest and delight in him. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

GOING DEEPER

Advent **(Week 2/4) Hope: The Promise of a Saviour**

Small Group Discussion Questions

On Your Front Line this Week

How can you use this Advent season to demonstrate God's generosity?

For Families

- *Download:* some of the family resources to use at home: stbartskids.org

Listen, Watch, and Read

- *Listen (sermon):* "Light in the Darkness" by Tim Keller:
<https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/light-in-the-darkness/>
- *Listen (sermon):* "A Call to Hope" by Pete Wilkinson:
<https://stebbes.org/sermons/a-call-to-hope/#sermons>
- *Listen (sermon):* "The Light of Christmas" by Pete Wilkinson:
<https://stebbes.org/sermons/the-light-of-christmas/#sermons>
- *Read (research):* "The Erosion of Hope" by ANU:
<https://politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/files/docs/2025/3/Erosion-of-hope---For-web.pdf>

Series Resources

- *Read:* "Advent (Fullness of Time Series)" by Tish Harrison Warren. 📖
- *Devotional:* "Sing in Exultation" by Jonanthan Landry Cruse. 📖
- *Devotional:* "The One True Gift" by Tim Chester. 📖
- *Devotional:* "Advent for Everyone: Luke" by Tom Wright. 📖
- *Read:* "What Christians Ought to Believe" by Michael Bird. 📖
- *Read:* "Is Christmas Unbelievable" by Rebecca McLaughlin. 📖
- *Read:* "The God who Became Human" by Graham Cole. <https://bit.ly/3g68RBj>
- *Read:* "On the Incarnation" by Athanasius. <https://bit.ly/3E5gLmB>
- *Watch:* "The Word Becomes Human" by the Bible Project. <https://bit.ly/3UEL8HB>
- *Watch:* "The Incarnation (Spoken Word)" by Humble Word. <https://bit.ly/3OhgPUP>
- *Listen:* A Carols Playlist (curated by the St Bart's staff team): <https://spoti.fi/3OaIsTK>

Isaiah 9:2-7 – Hope

In 1980 a young man named Terry Fox set out to run across Canada, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the length of a full marathon each day. If this wasn't enough, Terry was running with a prosthetic leg—and not like those that have been engineered in recent years. With each stride, he had to do a double-hop on his foot to allow for the springs in the prosthetic leg to reset. It was gruelling. He had begun this journey because three years prior, he was diagnosed with cancer in his knee and his leg was amputated. He was given a 50% chance of survival. As the cancer continued to spread, he decided to go on this run to raise awareness about and funds for cancer research. Sadly, he was forced to end his journey about half-way through. He passed away nine months later.

He named his attempt—this heroic attempt—the Marathon of Hope. Here is what he wrote to the Canadian Cancer Society about it:

as I went through the 16 months of the physically and emotionally draining ordeal of chemotherapy, I was rudely awakened by the feelings that surrounded and coursed through the cancer clinic. There were faces with the brave smiles, and the ones who had given up smiling. There were feelings of hopeful denial, and the feelings of despair. ... Somewhere the hurting must stop ... and I was determined to take myself to the limit for this cause.

Why should I draw out attention to such a tragic story? Because despite appearances, it centres on *hope*. In this letter, Terry Fox wrote of different kinds of hope—and even of different kinds of despair, the absence of hope. But it also speaks to a particular kind of hope that *he* had. It was not a blind hope; it was a hope that has its eyes wide open. This kind of hope is willing to anticipate something good in the future despite all appearances to the contrary. The hope in this story is *not* wishful thinking. The one who has this hope looks suffering and death square in the face, and yet refocuses his vision and fixes his eyes on something ahead of himself—something that comes from beyond himself, but in which he is

intimately involved. This young man hoped for a cure and participated in the process of finding one.

Isaiah's Prophecy

This hope in many ways resembles the kind of hope that we see in our reading from Isaiah. The passage is a prophecy: it is a promise from God for the future—an object of hope for the people of Israel. It is a call to look the dark reality of Israel's situation directly in the face and yet to refocus on the bright promise and work of God. This hope doesn't arise from within the people of Israel; it is not one that depends on Israel's own elbow grease. Instead, it depends solely on the work of God. The call to Israel is to look beyond the suffering and to fix their eyes on God—who alone can and will resolve this suffering and save them, and who in the meantime will be their comfort.

The prophecy itself has an immediate historical context that is known to us, at least in part. God's chosen people, Israel, had at this point broken up into two kingdoms: the North and the South. Isaiah was God's prophet—God's mouthpiece—to the southern kingdom. Interestingly, this particular prophecy promises something not only to the southern kingdom, but also to the northern one—which had very recently been ravaged by the violent Assyrian empire. This northern territory, the Galilee, includes Nazareth, where Jesus will come from some 700 years later.

Those scholars who are sceptical that such a prophecy could apply to Jesus who came all those centuries later insist that the fulfilment of this and other prophecies in the early chapters of Isaiah must fall within the immediate aftermath of the prediction. It must (they think) have some historical referent from the eighth century BC. The problem is that scholars can't agree who this person might be. Some think it doesn't refer to the birth of a child at all,

but that ‘birth’ is an analogy for coronation—in this case of king Hezekiah, who was soon to be installed as king of the southern kingdom. There are other candidates that scholars point to. However, the reality is that none is terribly convincing. None of the suggestions quite match up with the passage itself.

The discrepancy between the prophecy and the suggested historical candidates is so notable that ancient and contemporary Jewish interpreters have for many ages recognised that this is a prophecy that expands beyond its immediate historical horizon. It is a prophecy of the Messiah—the Christ—that anointed king who is promised throughout the pages of the Old Testament.

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, then, is in good company, when it quotes this passage as referring to Jesus, the Christ, the anointed king. Matthew quotes the beginning of this passage: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (9:2). He takes it as a statement about the entirety of Jesus’ ministry. For this quotation immediately precedes this statement in the Gospel of Matthew: “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (4:17). Just as the people of Israel knew this prophecy was messianic, so Matthew the evangelist also understands that it is messianic: it refers to the coming of Jesus the Christ—Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the king. The kingdom of heaven has come near, because Jesus the king has come near.

But before we say more about this promised king, let’s turn to begin with to the promised kingdom. This is what our passage does at any rate: first what the kingdom will look like, and then who the king is that will usher it in.

The Kingdom

What will this coming reign look like? First, we are told that there will be great joy: “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” (9:3). Why is there such rejoicing? The Prophet explains: “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. Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire” (9:4-5). These are statements in the negative: they describe what *won’t* be included in this kingdom. *The continual threat and reality of violence and oppression in our world will be broken by the rod of this king.*

It is almost impossible to imagine this in our world. If we are *too* intent on being optimists—or to put it more bluntly, if we pull the wool over our eyes—then perhaps we can imagine that we live in a society without violence, or at least without war. As a nation, Australia has never witnessed a war on her soil. On the soil of my native Canada, there hasn’t been a war for over two centuries. If we avoid the news—and I understand why we would—then we might be excused for thinking that there is peace in the world or at least that there is peace in Australia. But there is not. There *is* violence and there *is* oppression. When we have our eyes wide open, it’s impossible to imagine a world in which we are free of these tragedies.

The prophecy given here, though, promises that the yoke of oppression will be broken; that every sign of violence—jackboots and blood-stained uniforms—will go up in a puff of smoke. As Isaiah the prophet says elsewhere:

Isaiah 2:4: “[The LORD] will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

Isaiah 11:6: “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”

We will reflect more on this true peace that the Messiah brings next week. But for now: the prophet—God’s mouthpiece—is at pains to show, in these vibrant images, that the reality of this violent and oppressive world will be no more. The world will be empty of these things and those who do them.

In addition to what will not be there in this kingdom—a negative statement—the prophecy includes, positive, what this promised king offers. The promised king will “establish and uphold [the kingdom] with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (9:7).

But where is there justice and righteousness in our kingdoms? They just aren’t here. It’s true that in our political system there is a measure of fairness—a measure of justice. But even if corruption is at a minimum, we are, at the very least, at the mercy of woefully faulty human judgments. It is hard even to conceive of a truly just society. But this is what is promised in the promised kingdom.

This is possible because it is God’s king who will rule. The judgment that he will mete out comes with perfect knowledge. He doesn’t make mistakes that need to be appealed in a higher court. His justice will be perfectly good and merciful—to both the offender and the victim. The sentences will match the crime. The restoration of the fallen will occur by God’s gracious power.

The King

Is this peace and justice too good to be true? What answer can we give in response to this question? The promise is guaranteed by the king. Here is how he is described: “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. 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" (9:6-7).

Who is this king, but Jesus?

Why is the promised one called "wonderful counsellor" and "everlasting Father"? Because Christ, the father, and the Spirit are one God, the blessed and eternal Trinity: Jesus himself says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30); and elsewhere "the Advocate," that is the counsellor, who is "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Why is the promised one called "mighty God"? Because Jesus Christ is God in the flesh: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:1,14).

Why is the promised one called the "prince of peace"? Because Jesus "ma[de] peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:19-20).

Who is this king but Jesus?

If these scriptures appear to provide only superficial similarities, it is nevertheless the case that the whole passage points to Jesus as the one who brings peace and righteousness. It speaks to the grace of Christ and his introduction of a comprehensive salvation—one that is at once political and spiritual; one that embraces the entirety of created reality, heaven and earth. In this age, with his first coming, Christ's rule is a spiritual one; it is seen most of all in the church rather than in the world. In the age to come, his rule will encompass not only the spiritual and not only the church, but all of creation. And so, while we await the fulfillment of

the entirety of these promises in the Lord's coming-again, Christ has already accomplished in part what this prophecy promises in his first coming.

But I want to focus on the character of the one who has promised this, and the one who will bring it about: God and God's king.

His rule is characterised by a gentleness—a different kind of yoke than that of the Assyrians, one that is “easy and light” (Matt 11:30)—because he himself is ‘everlasting father’: he loves his creatures as a good father loves his children. At the same time, he is ‘mighty God’: he is powerful to establish and maintain the peace and justice that he desires for those he so tenderly loves. As ‘wonderful counsellor’, he is wise: he has every resource to accomplish what he wills in the midst of life's messiness.

He is ‘prince of peace’ because he is perfectly at peace, eternally, with the Father and the Spirit, and because in his coming-in-the-flesh he invites his creatures into this divine peace. And by his coming, and his death and resurrection, he has brought this peace to us, his beloved creatures. Let's hear from the Apostle once more: “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:19-20). Christ has already made spiritual peace for us by his self-sacrifice: we have peace with the Father—we are reconciled with the Father. In the power of the Spirit, the body of Christ may also learn to be reconciled with one another. This gift of Christ is a real and enduring peace for those who embrace it.

So—in his first coming, Christ has begun to bring a real peace and a real justice within his church and, through his church, into the world. And he will return in glory to bring a real peace and a real justice to all of creation. It is for this reason that the Prophet can say: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of

deep darkness, on them has light shone” (9:2). In the first coming, the light of Christ has begun to shine—his loving and glorious reign has begun. At that coming which we await, God himself will be our light: “No longer will the sun be your light by day, nor the brightness of the moon shine on your night; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your splendor” (Isa 60:19).

Conclusion: Participating in Hope

I mentioned at the outset a particular kind of hope. One that looks the evils of the world—sin, sickness, oppression, violence, and death—square in the face, *but then readjusts focus and looks beyond it*. The coming of something good may not be visible in this world, or on our horizon, but it *is* there nevertheless. It is not there because I am a wishful thinker or am hoping against hope—or because I think I can achieve the outcome myself—but because it is guaranteed by one who is trustworthy, wise, powerful, good, and merciful.

In the face of all life’s evils, it is not an easy thing to hold onto this hope. In our world, hope, and acting on that hope, takes courage. So, how can we act courageously on that hope?

In the service of this king, we can begin already in this age to participate in the work that the Prophet promises will come. We are given the gift of being intimately involved in the hope that Jesus Christ brings. It is not that we will bring about the fulfilment of these promises—only God can do that. However, while we wait, we can practice peace and justice. And much more than this: we can receive by God’s grace a true foretaste of the peace and justice that are to come.

This participation in the hope of the coming of Jesus Christ will look different for each of us. First, we can work for peace. This includes sharing the good news that in Christ

God is reconciled with those who were formerly his enemies. We may seek forgiveness from others for wrongs we have done, and we may forgive others when they have wronged us—this brings about a taste of peace. Second, we can work for justice, contributing prayerfully and materially for those in the world who are subject to oppression and violence—that they might have peace and their oppressors might receive a just sentence in this age. There is much we can do so that we and others receive a foretaste of that hope that awaits us.

So today, with the Prophet, let's look the suffering of the world square in the face, and yet readjust our focus to that promise that lies beyond the suffering—and as we do so, let's pray:

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for your promises declared to us by your Spirit, through the Prophet Isaiah. Thank you that in the coming of your Son you have preached peace to those who are far off and those who are near. Thank you that by your grace we can participate even now in the making of peace and justice. And at the last, when you come to judge the living and the dead, bring us all to peace and rest everlasting. In Christ's name. Amen.