

Hope amidst Despair

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[0 : 00] Well, you'll know that the UK official singles chart reflects the UK's biggest songs of the week, and it's based on audio and video streams on downloads, as well as on record sales.

And so that means the most popular songs in the chart aren't necessarily those songs which are new, but those that have been listened to the most and the most played.

And so Christmastime is a time of year when all the Christmas classics flood the charts, and so we hear songs like Last Christmas by Wham, which I think is number one right now in the UK.

Wonderful Christmastime by Paul McCartney, Step Into Christmas by Elton John, Fairy Tale of New York by the Pogues and Kirstie McCall. And of course, who could forget Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas is You?

Well, probably would be a good thing if we could all forget Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas is You. And this year, I don't know if you picked up in the news, but there's been some controversy over the band-aid song, Do They Know It's Christmas?

[1 : 09] And the controversy is over the lyrics, which have been thought to be outdated when it comes to the song's portrayal of Africa. Do They Know It's Christmas? You probably know it was co-written by Bob Geldof, but apparently Bob Geldof is fed up of his song.

In an interview, he said, I am responsible for two of the worst songs in history. One is Do They Know It's Christmas? And the other one is We Are The World.

You know the one, We Are The World? I won't sing it, but I think you know the one I mean. But both of these songs are songs about changing the world, aren't they? Do they know it's Christmas time about changing the world, specifically Africa?

And We Are The World is a song about, well, we ourselves can change the world. And I don't know what Bob's, or Sir Bob's, problem is with these songs, But I suspect it's the reality that we as human beings can't actually change the world, as much as we would like to think that we can.

Of course, we are well aware that the world is not as it should be, with all the poverty and the injustice and the violence and the evil. But no matter how much we sing about it, and no matter how much money we raise for it, we're painfully aware that we are pretty powerless to effect real and lasting change in this world.

[2 : 36] And yet the fantastic promise of Christmas is that God can and God will change this world. And that's what our Bible reading from Isaiah chapter 9 declares loudly and clearly to us, because in it we hear an announcement, and it's an announcement of hope amidst despair, with a promise of a divine king who will be the perfect ruler.

And Jesus Christ is that ruler. He is the one that Isaiah chapter 9 is referring to. And he's a ruler who far exceeds all of our expectations for this world, and he's also a ruler who meets the deepest longings of our human hearts, because he is the ultimate hope for this world and for our lives.

And so as Christmas has come and now is gone, perhaps that's what you really need to hear today. Perhaps you come here slightly deflated, slightly depressed, slightly anxious, and so you need to be reminded of this amazing reality that Jesus is our hope amidst despair, or maybe you need to discover this for the first time yourself.

Now, Isaiah's words, just to give the context here, are prophetic. So they were written around 700 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem on that very first Christmas.

And it was a time of distress and darkness and fearful gloom. So if you look at the end of Isaiah chapter 8, that's exactly the context that Isaiah's listeners were living in.

[4 : 19] Distress and darkness and fearful gloom. And it's because they were led by a foolish king called Ahaz. And they were threatened by a superpower that was the Assyrian Empire.

And so they were in despair. They were afraid and they were without hope. And so Isaiah's message is exactly what these people needed to hear.

And it is exactly what you and I need to hear too. Because their fear and their distress is something that we can totally relate to today.

For example, it might be distress at the global situation our world finds itself in, with the war in Ukraine or the Israel-Gaza war or the so-called emergency, sorry, the climate emergency.

There's been recent elections. And so we have new leaders. We have powerful leaders. And we might think they're hopeless leaders. And there's continual evil and suffering all over the world in all kinds of different countries.

[5 : 26] So that's the global situation and it seems pretty bleak. But then there's the national situation if we narrow it down a bit. Because there's distress and there's darkness and there's gloom in our nation.

Whether it's the increasing division that there is in our society. The lack of confidence that we have in our politicians. The amount of poverty that we see throughout the UK.

Or ethical dilemmas like the recent debate on assisted suicide which will linger on. Scotland is the drug-related deaths capital of Europe.

It's a bleak place. So many other forms of abuse go on as well. So there's the global situation.

There's the national situation. But if we narrow it down further, as well as the global and the national there, is our own personal situation as well.

Because there's distress and there's darkness. There's fear. There's gloom in our lives and even in our hearts. In our families perhaps.

[6 : 35] In our workplaces we are anxious and we're worried. There may be many tears that are frequently shed in our homes. There may be difficult relationships that we are enduring.

There may be disagreements. And there are always issues that need to be sorted. Problems that need to be resolved. We might have many regrets about the past and what we've done.

We might be dissatisfied about life in the present. Or we might just be really fearful of the future. At the very least we are painfully aware that we're not the person that we should be.

Or could be. Or even want to be. And so like the people in Isaiah's day. We've got to realize that our biggest problems are not out there. Not just out there in the world.

Whether they be political. Or economical. Or social. Or environmental. No. Humanity's biggest problem is spiritual. It's here. It's our heart.

[7 : 38] That is the root cause of all the other issues and problems in our world. The human heart. Alexander Solzhenitsyn. A Russian author.

Said this. The line separating good and evil passes not through states. Nor between classes. Nor between political parties either. But right through every human heart.

And through all human hearts. And so the consequences of our sinful hearts. Is this world we live in that is characterized by distress.

And darkness. And gloom. Just like it was in Isaiah's day. And that's why there is so much disorder. So much disagreement. So much disease.

And decay. And disaster. And death. In our world. It's all because we have turned away from our loving creator God. And as a result we've messed up our lives.

[8 : 35] And we've messed up this world. And J.K. Rowling. The creator of the Harry Potter novels. Is frequently in the news. And generally.

When she's in the news. It's always about her views on transgender ideology. Where there's this ongoing feud. Between J.K. Rowling. And the former cast members of her Harry Potter films.

So stars like Daniel Radcliffe and Emma Watson. Are publicly outspoken. On their criticism of J.K. Rowling. And her views. And it's interesting when you think about it.

Because here is the creator. Of the whole Harry Potter franchise. And she is rejected. By the very people that she has made rich and famous.

And given a name to. They'd be nobodies and nothings. Without J.K. Rowling. And I think this helps us. As we think about the way that humanity.

[9 : 36] Has treated God. Because we would not exist. Without him. And yet we have chosen to reject him. We're happy to live in his world.

We're happy to enjoy all of his blessings. All of the privileges. And yet we object. To his views. We think that we know better.

How to live our lives. In this his world. And yet as we look back over human history. Or as we look around at the world today. We've got to ask.

Well how's that working out? Clearly the answer is. Not very well. We've messed up this world. And the good news is.

God hasn't given up. God hasn't given up on his world. And God hasn't given up on us. As a human race. And what you see in Isaiah chapter 9.

[10:30] Are words that are bursting with hope. Pointing to a future. When God will not only save his people. Which is why Jesus came. But God will bring about a perfected kingdom.

Under the loving rule of the Lord Jesus Christ. And just listen to how Isaiah describes it in verse 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 way of the sea beyond the Jordan. So God here is announcing the arrival of Jesus. In this world. The arrival of Jesus on earth. Even pinpointing the exact location of his ministry.

So GPS is actually nothing new at all. Because here in verse 1. Galilee of the nations is where Jesus' ministry took place. That was where it was going to happen.

[11:34] And so this is just one of many promises in Isaiah. That are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And if it was hot on the heels of Isaiah chapter 7. And verse 14.

Which is what we looked at if you were here on Christmas Day. When the Lord is promising a sign.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son.

And will call him Emmanuel. Words that are speaking of hope. Hope for God's people back then.

But hope for God's people now. And hope for God's people.

And this world in every age. In fact the great hope in Jesus that Isaiah speaks of. Is so certain and so sure.

That it's spoken of. The future is spoken of. Like it has already happened. And so what we see here in Isaiah 9. Is darkness turning to light.

[12:33] Verse 2. Listen. The people walking in darkness. Have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness. A light has dawned.

So there's darkness turning to light. A day would come. When Jesus would break into that darkness. And shine his light. As the light of the world. Verse 3.

Then Isaiah speaks of fear turning to joy. Fear turning to joy. Listen. 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. So the day would come. When Jesus would cause people to celebrate.

Because he gives true and lasting joy. So there's darkness turning to light. There's fear turning to joy. Verse 4. There is oppression turning to freedom.

[13:28] Isaiah speaks of oppression turning to freedom. Listen. Verse 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. So the day would come. When Jesus would bring true and lasting deliverance.

To his people. And then he speaks of war turning to peace. Verse 5. Listen. Every warrior's boot used in battle. And every garment rolled in blood.

Will be destined for burning. Will be fuel for the fire. So the day would come. When Jesus would bring true and lasting peace. Because all war will end.

All the battle tools. All the uniforms will no longer be needed. They can be burnt. So what's Isaiah doing? He's promising light. He's promising joy.

[14:23] He's promising freedom. He's promising peace. Isn't that the world we all want? Of course it is. But it all sounds too good to be true.

Doesn't it? That's because we naively get sucked into thinking. That we can create or shape this world into that ourselves. That we're the ones who can bring about this kind of utopia.

Utopia that Isaiah speaks of. That we are the world. We are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day. So let's start giving. There's a choice we're making. We're saving our own lives.

It's true. We'll make a better day. Just you and me. We all know that is just a load of rubbish. Isn't it? We can't change the world as much as we'd like to think we can.

It is basically just delusional thinking. We think that with a bit more love perhaps. With better education in our school system.

[15:23] With new polities. With fresh political leadership. If we pull our socks up a bit. And become a nicer person. Nicer husband. Nicer father. Better in the workplace.

Then this world will be a better place. We can fix it. And yet Christianity is brutally honest. About the spiritual problem we face.

The problem is our sin. And the problem is the consequences of that sin are devastating. And the reality is that we are completely unable to do anything about it.

And so what Christmas tells us. And what Christianity tells us. Is that we are in darkness. And doom and gloom and distress. And we need help.

And the fantastic promise of Isaiah is that help is on its way. Help is coming. And it's coming in a person. Because right here in Isaiah we get God's manifesto for the world.

[16:26] He outlines it for us. He speaks of this perfect ruler. Who will come to sort everything out. And put everything right. Not just for the readers of Isaiah's day.

But for all people. In all times. In all places. Because what God will do. Will be to send a divine ruler. Who will come from outside of this world. Into the world. In order to sort the world. And he has come hasn't he. If you look at the horizon of this dark world's history.

At one moment in history. Around 2,000 years ago. About 2,000 miles away from where we are sat today. That light came and shone into the darkness of world history.

And that light was Jesus Christ. That's what Isaiah is saying here. So verse 6. For to us a child is born. To us a son is given.

[17:29] And the government will be on his shoulders. Did you get that? This child is born. And so we're talking about a baby.

A baby. Being born. In this world. Who will be the perfect ruler. Who will sort everything out. But he's not just a human baby.

Because we're told. He is also. A son. A son is given. And so we're also talking here about God's gracious intervention.

In our world. And in our lives. Where this child was and is fully human. At the same time as being fully God.

And of course this is none other than the eternal son of God. Jesus Christ. Who was and is and always has been God. But at one moment in time.

[18:26] Taking on a human nature. Becoming a baby. Being the rescuer. The saviour. The perfect ruler. Come to fix our mess.

And what he'd be is spelt out. In the four names that are given to him here. And he will be called. Wonderful counsellor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father.

Prince of Peace. Jesus is wonderful counsellor. Now you know we're not short of counsellors today. Council comes from multiple sources.

Politicians and scientists and teachers and authors and journalists. Even celebrities will offer us their counsel. Telling us how to live. And in some cases even how we should think.

They all want to give us their wisdom. And it might be through teaching. It might be through indoctrination. But Jesus is the true source of wisdom that we need.

[19:32] He directs us to the truth about God. The truth about ourselves. The truth about our world. So he's the one that we need to listen to.

His voice should be the loudest voice in our ears. Above all other voices. And yet we know that what Jesus counsels is often just far too radical for our society to take.

And so the institutions that seek to give counsel. Schools. Universities. Even parliaments. What Jesus says is often the only counsel that will not be listened to or tolerated.

But Jesus is the source of wise counsel. To guide us. To guide us out of our darkness and into light. Now today people will say that we need more knowledge.

We need better education. We need greater understanding. Jesus the wonderful counselor gives all this. So who is it that you listen to?

[20:41] No, who do you really listen to? So this past week as you've been vegging out on the sofa. With your stomach absolutely bloated.

With all the turkey. And the Brussels sprouts. And the Christmas pudding. And everything else. And as you've looked at your phone. And you've scrolled through. How much time have you spent

listening to the message and the counsel from our society?

Compared to the amount of time you've spent listening to the counsel of Jesus. Our wonderful counselor. Our wonderful counselor. That's who he is. He is wonderful counselor. Jesus is secondly mighty God.

Jesus displayed the power of God when he walked on this earth. When you read the gospels it comes in his teaching. It comes in his control of nature.

It comes through his healings. It comes through his power over death. He was and is none other than mighty God. God in human flesh.

[21 : 43] God in human flesh. And so Jesus does for us what we are powerless to do for ourselves. Because by his suffering and through his death.

Jesus conquered our enemies. Sin and death. And the devil. That's why he came. And Jesus is not just willing to save us. And our world.

But he is able. Because he is mighty God. Now today people will say we need more power to change things. We need less evil and suffering.

We need greater justice. Only Jesus. The mighty God. Can bring all of this about. He is the mighty God.

Jesus is everlasting father. We might scratch our heads and wonder why would Jesus be called father. Because when we say that God is Trinity. We speak of God the Father.

[22 : 41] God the Son. And God the Holy Spirit. But Isaiah is not talking about the Trinity here. This is a title that Jesus has. That tells us about Jesus coming.

To bring us into God's family. As his children. And so Jesus loves us. Despite what we are.

And like any good father. Jesus protects us. He provides for us. He gives us everything we need.

He is gentle and caring. And forgiving. And compassionate.

And comforting. Like the father we all want. And need. As who Jesus is to us. And he'll be with us forever.

Everlasting father. Now today people say what we need is. Is genuine relationships. We need lasting love and commitment.

[23 : 38] We need real commitment. We need people who won't just drop us. When we fail. We need to forgive. We need to forgive. We need to forgive. Only Jesus. The everlasting father.

Gives this. He loves us so much. That he died for us. That despite our failure. And sin. He's the only one who forgives us. And never cancels us.

Like everybody else will. If given the chance. And Jesus is the prince of peace. He's the prince of peace. Interestingly. Everybody. Everybody wants peace.

There's probably something wrong in somebody's head. If they don't want peace. Peace between people. Peace in our world. Inner peace with ourselves.

And Isaiah is saying. Jesus is the one who brings peace with God. He's the prince of peace.

Because by nature. We are not at peace with God. We're God's enemies.

[24 : 33] Because of our sin. And yet Jesus came to reconcile us to God. Through his death on the cross. And one day Jesus will bring that lasting peace.

That we would love to see in this world. Verse 7 says that he will reign over his kingdom.

Establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness.

That's the world we all want. And it only comes in Jesus. And so today people will say. We need world peace.

We need inner peace. We need peace with other people. Only Jesus can give this. Because he is the prince of peace. Now as we read this.

You might be asking. If this is who Jesus is. Then why is there still darkness in this world? Why is my life still such a struggle?

[25 : 31] Why doom and gloom and distress? Well it's because we're still waiting for this. Kingdom to come in all its fullness.

But we can be sure that one day it will. Listen to verse 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. Ever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty.

Will accomplish this. So what we're told here. Is that the baby Jesus. Who we celebrate at Christmas. Is the cosmic Christ.

Who will reign forever. Well Christmas Carol puts it this way. He came down to earth from heaven. Who is God and Lord of all.

[26 : 32] And isn't it amazing to think. That God entered this world. As an embryo. In a human womb. He became human.

Because only human. Flesh. Can die. One Christian thinker. C.S. Lewis. Put it like this. In the Christian story.

God descends. To re-ascend. He comes down. Down from the heights. Of absolute being. Into time and space. Down into humanity. Down further still.

Down to the very roots. And seabed. Of the nature. He has created. But he goes down. To come up again. And bring the whole. Ruined world.

Up with him. In his descent. And re-ascend. Everyone will recognize. A familiar pattern. A thing written. All over the world. It is a pattern. Of all vegetable life.

[27 : 28] It must belittle itself. Into something hard. Small. And death-like. It must fall. Into the ground. Thence. New life. Re-ascends. The doctrine.

Of the incarnation. Puts this principle. Even more emphatically. At the center. The pattern. Is there. In nature. Because it was first. There.

In God. C.S. Lewis goes on. I am not. Now referring. Simply to the crucifixion. And resurrection. Of Christ. The total pattern. Of which they are. Only the turning point.

Is the real death. And rebirth. For certainly. No seed ever fell. From so fair. A tree. Into so dark. And cold. A soil. As would furnish.

More. Than a faint. Analogy. Of this huge. Descent. And re-ascension. In which God. Dredged. The salt. And oozy. Bottom. Of creation.

[28 : 23] From C.S. Lewis's book. Miracles. Telling us of. The eternal. Son. Of God. Stooping down. So low.

On that very. First Christmas. To be born. In this world. For us. And descending. Further. Still. By giving up. His life.

To die. On a cross. For us. So that through. His birth. And then his life. And then his death. And then his resurrection. We might be saved.

Out of. Distress. Darkness. And the gloom. Of a world. Wrecked. And ruined. By sin. Where not only.

Can we. Be restored. To our loving creator. But all creation. Will be restored. As well. So as we wrap things up.

[29 : 21] The son of God. Was given to us. So that we can become. Children. Of God. He descended. Into this world. That we might ascend.

To be in the very. Presence of God. Forever. In a perfected. Kingdom. And so Jesus has come. And he reaches out to us.

To be our wonderful counselor. Our mighty God. Our everlasting father. Our prince of peace. And so while Christianity. Is brutally realistic.

About the state of our world. And the problem. Of our sin. The fantastic news. Is that God has not left us. Hopeless. Or helpless.

That's why Christmas. Is such a great time of year. To celebrate. God has given. Our world. Our world.

[30 : 16] Including you. And me. The greatest gift ever. The gift of Jesus Christ. And so. The final question. Is this. Well. What have you done.

With this gift. gift. Because a gift. Is only. Ours. When we. Receive it. And use it. We need to take it. And do something with it. And so this child. Born. To us. This son. Given. To us. Must be received.

By us. And if you've never done that. Then will you. Receive Jesus. He's the one you need. He's the one.

We all need. That's why. He came. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.