

## The Power of God's Presence

I like to consider myself an optimist. I try to look on the bright side of things and in general, I tend to think the future will get better. But sometimes my optimism is challenged. Like whenever I make the mistake of going on social media. That will challenge even the most positive person's optimism...and that's why I stopped doing it a long time ago.

But I don't bury my head in the sand. I know there is still poverty in the world. I know we live in a nation that's divided and antagonistic. I know we have an immigration system that needs many changes. I know cancer still exists. I know all these things, but in spite of them, I'm still an optimist. Why?

I believe humans have been able to accomplish some good things. Advances in science, technology and medicine have been amazing over the last century or so. And they've alleviated a lot of suffering in the world. We've been able to solve many of the problems that have plagued us for most of human history. But despite all this, my optimism doesn't come from my faith in human progress.

You see, our technological advances haven't ended wars. In fact, more people died in wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than any other century in history—more than 108 million people. I don't know if our political polarization is greater than it's been in the past, but we certainly don't agree on how to achieve a flourishing society.

We have more tools to meet people and maintain relationship with more people than we've ever had—dating apps, friendship apps, social media, texting, chat, video chat and even something call the telephone. All of them at our fingertips, so we should be able find and maintain relationships like no society has ever had.

We even have a ton of tools to maintain our relationship with God. Dozens of Bible translations in English, Bible's sitting around our house as well as Bible apps, Bible Study tools, daily scripture that can be sent right to our phone.

And yet, despite all these things that were created to help us make life better, virtually every study in the last 10 years shows that we are increasingly disconnected and lonely. One recent poll of 20,000 people showed that 76% of Americans feel moderately to severely lonely. Each successive generation reports a greater sense of *loneliness* than the generation before them. So, it's getting worse, not better.

And more and more research is tying loneliness to greater health risks. In fact, despite incredible advances in medicine and nutrition, the last three successive years, the life expectancy of Americans has declined—something we haven't seen since 1918 (that was caused by WWI and a flu pandemic that killed 675,000 Americans). Most attribute this modern decline to an increase in drug use and suicide, both of which are strong indicators of flourishing.

There are many theories about why people are so lonely today—from too much social media and internet use to the mobility of our society, but of the most interesting

that I've read and psychologists tend to agree with is that for many people there's seems to be an underlying sense of "homelessness."

Some of this is because many of us don't live where we grew up. This is true for me. One of the more depressing thoughts I have sometimes is that right now, if I were to die, I don't know where I would be buried. I don't live in my hometown. I don't even have much family there anymore. Most of my family is in Sioux Falls, but I only lived there for four years during college, so it's not really home. That makes me feel a bit homeless.

But this phenomenon isn't entirely new. This was the kind of homelessness the people of Israel would have felt at the time when the prophet Isaiah was writing.

In Isaiah, chapter 9, Isaiah was writing to the people of Israel warning them that God was about to judge them. They were in the middle of a tense political situation. There were the two powers; Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south. In a few years, Babylon to the east would come in and take Assyria's place. Over the years, the kings of Israel waffled between paying tribute to Assyria and Babylon and Egypt to receive protection. But the prophets continually warned them not to trust these other nations. They said, "you think you'll get protection, but eventually they'll turn on you." God wanted them to trust Him, but instead they trusted their own political savvy.

And they worshipped other gods, they took advantage of the poor and didn't work for justice for the oppressed. When they worshipped, they were going through the motions. Because of all these things God gave them what they wanted. "You want to

trust in Assyria? Fine, here you go.” And they were taken away from their home, away from everything familiar.

Life was surprisingly OK in Babylon. There wasn’t a lot of violence, the Babylonian economy was good and they were largely open to foreigners, so they could be successful there. But even though all the externals were good, it wasn’t *home*.

70 years later, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to go back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem and many Jews moved back home. But many of them stayed in Babylon or even migrated to Egypt. They were still Jews but they lost something of themselves being away from their homeland. Even the Jews that were allowed back to Jerusalem were still under the authority of another Empire.

Most of the Jews expected that the way God would deal with their situation would be to fix it—to overthrow the Persians and return them to power. Then, when they were back in power and they could make the laws and they would recreate home again. But Isaiah 9 shows us that God had a different solution in mind.

He starts at the beginning of the chapter by telling them that, even though things might look bad now, there’s a light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. Look at verse 2, **“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”**

This is a short sentence, but a powerful image. Imagine you’re walking through a desert. You’ve been walking a long time. You’re exhausted and wondering if you’re ever

going to get to your destination and if you're even going in the right direction. Then someone gives you binoculars. And with the binoculars, very faintly in the distance, you see the lights of the city. What impact would that have on you?

You're not there yet. But with help, you can see your destination. The outcome is sure and it's only a matter of time. That's the look Isaiah is giving the people of Israel. This is a passage that promises a Messiah that will end their time in the desert. In fact, Isaiah is so confident of what God will do, he describes God's future actions in past tense.

Look at verse 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. 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."** Then he switches to future tense. **"Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire."**

When we read this, it's easy to see how Israel could have expected the Messiah to be a military leader. These are violent images—Israel defeating Midian in battle, shattering the yoke, boots and army uniforms being burned.

But when we read on, we find that God's peacekeepers aren't the peacekeeping forces of the U.N. today. It's almost like Isaiah is building them up for the huge, climactic battle scene, but then comes verse 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.”**

What? Did Isaiah leave out some verses? “Isaiah, when do we get to the battle?” But this is the plot twist. There is no battle. At least not a military battle. God promise a Messiah would come to their rescue, but it would look different than they expected.

When Isaiah writes about “shattering the yoke of the oppressor” and “burning the military clothes and boots,” it’s because they won’t be needed anymore. God’s idea of a peace-keeper isn’t a soldier, it’s a *baby* who will eventually become King. In fact, the word “Messiah” actually means “Anointed One” or “King.” But this King will be unlike any other King. He wouldn’t have governmental authority or an army to enforce his will.

Typically, the role of a King is to look out for their interest of his own people, not the surrounding people. But this Messiah wouldn’t *just* be King of the Jews, he would be the “**King of Kings and Lord of Lords**” as it says in Revelation (19:16). And the job of the King of Kings is to create peace and prosperity for everyone in his Kingdom.

We assume that because He’s God and all-powerful, that He would accomplish this by a show of force—coming down and striking fear into His enemies. Now He’s been known to do that, but when it came time for God to act on behalf of all humanity, He didn’t do it with power, He did it with His *presence*.

But what does that presence look like? Well, the answer is in verse 6 where there are four titles given to the Messiah—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting

Father, and Prince of Peace. These four titles are descriptions of the character of the Messiah. So, look and see what we can learn about the Messiah.

First, Isaiah describes the Messiah-King as *Wonderful Counselor*. Now, it's wonderful like, "So and so just had a baby, isn't that wonderful?" It's more like "excellent," or "exceptional." Not ordinary, but extra-ordinary.

He will be an excellent *counselor*. But not a counselor who listens to you talk about your problems and gives good advice, but someone who understands the world and is able to impart wisdom way beyond human understanding.

But it's not just giving advice to individuals. It the ability create and administer good policies. OT scholar, Walter Bruggeman calls it "wise governance." In other words, how do you order a society for maximum flourishing? It's not through violence or coercion. It's through changing minds and hearts.

Jesus never held a position of power, but he's the most influential teacher ever to live. His teachings have made their way into our social fabric. For instance, "Do to others as you would have them do to you," is what we call "The Golden Rule." Our society loves, "Don't judge lest you be judged," and rightfully so. His teachings on forgiveness and caring for the poor and turning the other cheek were revolutionary.

Throughout history, his followers have died fighting against injustice, founded hospitals and schools. They've created organizations to serve the poor and continue to give more money to the poor than anyone in the world. He taught with an influence and

power like no one else and his teachings have shaped society like no other teachings in history. Jesus is a wonderful counselor! //

Second, Isaiah says the Messiah King is *“Mighty God.”* The Messiah would have the power and authority of God. Here’s Walter Bruggeman, *“...his power is not grounded in the usual authority of Empire; it is not an authority that comes out of the end of a gun or a cannon in coercive or violent ways. His kingdom, his claim to authority is...derived from “the will of the father,” whose intention for the world is quite unlike the intent of Rome.”*

Power always has a source. Electricity is generated at a power plant through fossil fuels, or wind or sunlight. The power of a U.S. President comes from the Constitution, and so on. The source of power for the Messiah was God himself, but it’s not just given by God, but the Messiah *was* God.

The Gospels tell us Jesus wasn’t just as a great teacher or counselor, but he had incredible power. He turned water to wine, healed people, cast out demons, calmed a storm by speaking to it, raised Lazarus from the dead and was himself raised again after three days. And at the end of his life, when Jesus was questioned by pilot about being a king, he said, **“My kingdom is not from this world.”** (John 18:36)

This has to be true in order for him to make a real difference in our world. There are two reasons for this. First, if he simply had military or political power then his way is only one among many. People could say, “Who are you to impose your culture on us?” But if Jesus’ authority comes from God, we can appeal to his higher law when the laws of

a nation are unjust. Martin Luther King Jr. could never have succeeded if he couldn't make an appeal to divine justice that overrules human laws.

The second reason is not all of the problems in the world are human problems. If the problems in our world were simply caused by unjust governments, it might be different, but the Bible speaks of spiritual forces that wage war on the human heart. We don't just need changed laws, we need changed hearts. And only a king whose authority comes from God can do that. Jesus is Mighty God. //

Third, the Messiah was called "*Everlasting Father*." Now, this one is a little more difficult because we don't refer—and the Bible doesn't refer to Jesus as "father." In fact, when Jesus prays, he prays to his own father in heaven and he call him our father, too. So, how is Jesus everlasting father?

Well, it's not necessarily saying that Jesus will *be* the father, but this is about the character and function of a father. After all, Jesus said in John 14:9, "**If you have seen me, you have seen the father.**" And later in that same chapter, he's telling his disciples that he will be going away, but he assures them, "<sup>18</sup>**I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.**" So, what we see is that even though Jesus calls God his father, as part of the Trinity, he shares the character and role of father. So, what *is* the character and role of the father? Well, to Isaiah, the father was the *provider* and *protector* of his children.

But the Messiah isn't just "father," he's "everlasting father." Listen to what Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew 28:20 as he's preparing to leave. After he commissions

them to continue his mission, he says, **“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** Jesus is the everlasting protector and provider. //

And finally, the Messiah will be *“Prince of Peace.”* If you’ve studied the Old Testament, you’ll recognize that the word translated here as *peace* is the word “Shalom,” and it’s a great word with some amazing imagery associated with it. As usual, I can’t explain it better than the guys at The Bible Project, so watch this [Peace video].

People have made a valiant effort in our own power to solve many of the problems of our world. There are many ways in which we’ve made life easier, safer, and more bearable than it’s ever been. Every election, politicians stand at rallies and promise to solve all the problems that plague us. We deploy troops and call them home. And yet no scientist, politician or military general can what’s wrong in the human *soul*.

God’s answers to the problems that plague us wasn’t to send a general or a politician. It wasn’t to send a scientist or psychologist or even a priest. His answer was to come down here and become our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. When people truly receive Jesus, there IS healing in their soul, but obviously the job is not complete. We see glimpses of it now, but it will only be complete when that same Messiah comes again. That’s how Advent ties together the first and second coming.

OK, so what is our response to all this? If we are waiting for Jesus to come finish the job, how should we live in the meantime? In other words, what does it mean for us

to receive Jesus as Messiah? Is it just an intellectual belief, or is it more? Well, of course it's more?

Well, first we should align ourselves with the teaching of the Wonderful Counselor. That means we should continue to dig in to the Word—to dig in to the teaching of Jesus because it's in them, not some political ideology or philosophy. If Jesus was really there at the beginning of creation then we can trust that he knows how things work—how the world works, how we work, what's best for us. Too often, rather than giving ourselves wholesale to the teachings of Jesus, we take the bits and pieces we like and replace the parts we don't like with something more palatable. But this advent, commit yourself fully to Jesus and his way of life.

Second, live in reliance on the power of the mighty God. I don't have to rehash this too much because we just did a whole focus season on prayer. But how many Christians live our daily lives as if God doesn't even exist. Sure, we try to be moral and be nice to people, but do we pray as if our prayers actually have power or do we try to solve everything ourselves? Do we listen for the Lord's leading in our day to day lives?

Third, if Jesus is our everlasting Father, we should live know that he is our *provider* and *protector*. If we trust Jesus is our provider, we will be filled with gratitude for what God has given us rather than being overcome by anxiety about our future. If we trust that he is our protector, we'll live courageous lives where we'll feel the need to pray because

if God doesn't come through, we'll be in a world of hurt. And we'll trust that God will be with us even to the end of the age.

And finally, if Jesus is our Prince of Peace, then we will seek the shalom of the people around us. We'll live reconciled to the people around us. Asking forgiveness when we need to and granting forgiveness to people who wrong us. Rather than seeing others as our competition and being filled with jealousy, we'll be happy about their prosperity. Instead of working hard to accumulate money and possessions for ourselves, we'll work hard to make sure people in need will have enough. We'll work for justice in our city, country and world.

I want to encourage you sometime—today or tomorrow to take some time to meditate on these names—these characteristics of Jesus and evaluate your own life in light of them. Trusting Jesus as your Messiah and the Savior of the world is more than just an intellectual exercise, it changes everything about you. Has he changed you?