

## **The Heart Of Christmas: Week 1**

Hope Is At The Heart Of Christmas

Pastor Clint Highfill

**Scripture:** Isaiah 9:2-7 // Matthew 1:22-23 // Romans 15:4

**Write Up:** The prophet Isaiah writes one of the most classic of all Old Testament prophecies about the coming birth of Christ. The passage he writes is born of gloom and darkness. The world had felt the full weight of sin, and it had wreaked havoc on all of creation. What Isaiah offered in chapter nine was something the Jewish people needed more than anything—hope. Hope that one day someone would come to make all things right and restore what had been broken. The birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of that hope and it offers us hope in our lives today.

**Think:** The birth of Jesus was something promised that actually came to pass. We can trust Jesus is still working today, and that gives us hope.

**Feel:** No matter what we are facing in life right now, anything is possible through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

**Do:** Consider the way God has been faithful in the past to give us hope for the present and the future.

### **Sermon Outline:**

The Christmas season is finally upon us. We can see and hear evidence of it all around. Good morning, church! It is so wonderful to be with you this morning as we begin a new sermon series that will introduce us to four of the main themes at the very heart of Christmas. The holiday season, with all the tinsel, trees, and treats, can easily distract us from what really matters, which is the Christ child. During this series, we will look at how hope, peace, joy and love are at the heart of Christmas. This morning we will discover the hope that comes to us through the birth of Jesus Christ. I am sure we could all use a little hope.

The true reason there is hope at the heart of Christmas is not because of gifts but because of the birth of Jesus Christ. His arrival on the earth was the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken hundreds of years ago. That prophecy is actually one of the most well-known scripture passages shared during this time of year.

## **Read Isaiah 9:2-7**

The backdrop to Isaiah's writings (around 740 BC) was poor leadership. The people of Israel had been suffering through the reigns of four ungodly kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. They were corrupt and had led the people far from God. It was a very dark time in history. Isaiah wrote these words knowing God would have to intervene to bring Israel back to himself. The kingdom was crumbling, and the people needed hope.

This passage makes two major statements. This first is an acknowledgement of the brokenness and darkness that surrounded Israel due to sin and corruption. The second is the hope of a dawning light through the birth of a child who would one day make all things right. The Jewish people in the Old Testament needed these words to remind them that God had not forgotten about them.

The book of Matthew also reminds us of Isaiah's writings. The gospel writer was making the connection between what Isaiah had prophetically written and what had taken place in a manger in Bethlehem.

## **Read Matthew 1:22-23**

A young Jewish man named Joseph was presented with a very difficult decision to make. He was engaged to be married to a woman named Mary, but she was already pregnant. Joseph planned to call the wedding off because it appeared his bride-to-be had been unfaithful. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to go forward with the marriage because the child in her womb was from the Holy Spirit. All of these events took place to fulfill the prophecy from the Old Testament, which claimed there would be a child born as a light in the darkness and a hope for all people. The child would be named Immanuel, which means God with us.

## **POINT #1 – THE PRESENCE OF DARKNESS THREATENS OUR HOPE**

The center of the Christmas story is focused squarely on the birth of Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the Israelite's hope that God would push back the darkness and shine a bright light into the world.

One of the reasons Christmas resonates in our hearts is because we, too, live in a world that is similar to Israel. Our world is dark and corrupt because of the sin that so easily entangles. There is war, disease, conflict, and oppression all around us. We, too, are in need of the Christ child to usher in a light to push back the darkness around us.

Christmas is a reminder that whatever it is we hope for in our lives—healing, restoration, forgiveness, or a fresh start—it is available to us through Immanuel, who is God with us. Hope is not a result of the absence of conflict, difficulty, struggle, or trial. Hope is a result of the presence of God.

## **POINT #2 – GOD’S PRESENCE HAS COME TO GIVE US HOPE**

The hard part about hope is that it often takes longer than we would like to be fulfilled. Like the Jewish people experienced, hope requires patience.

So why do we read Isaiah’s prophecy each year during Christmas? It is because seeing the faithfulness of God in the past gives us deep and abiding hope in the present and unwavering trust for the future. The apostle Paul made an appeal for hope to those who trust in Christ as he wrote a letter to the early church in Rome.

### **Read Romans 15:4**

Paul said everything that had been written in the past— all of the prophecy and fulfillment—is meant to teach us how to hold onto faith in God to answer our prayers. What has been written gives us endurance and encouragement that we might have hope. It is important that we revisit the prophetic words of the Old Testament and the fulfillment that comes through the birth of Jesus because it reminds us that God can be trusted to come through and meet us in our greatest time of need.

## **POINT #3 – AT THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS IS HOPE**

Though there are many distractions during the Christmas season, this message is a reminder that hope is offered to us through Jesus’s arrival in the manger.

Story: Dr. James Dobson relates a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior through a slow-developing cancer. Several days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by a brutal weather system. She felt terribly alone—so much so that she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas. Late that afternoon the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box. He said, "Mrs. Thornhope? Would you sign here?" She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, "What’s in the box?" The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, "This is for you, ma’am. He’s six weeks old and completely housebroken." The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity. "Who sent this?" Mrs. Thornhope asked. The young man set the animal down and handed her an envelope and said, "It’s all explained here in this envelope, ma’am. The dog was bought last July while its mother

was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift to you." The young man then handed her a book: How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever. In desperation she again asked, "Who sent me this puppy?" As the young man turned to leave he said, "Your husband, ma'am. Merry Christmas." She opened the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him in heaven. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then. She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and she remembered the puppy at her feet. She picked up the golden furry ball and held it to her neck.

Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." Suddenly, Stella felt the most amazing sensation [of hope] washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than the grief and loneliness. "Little fella," she said to the dog. "It's just you and me, but you know what? There's a box down in the basement I bet you'd like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it."

This story is meant to illustrate how God's prophetic word of Jesus's birth meets us at just the right time.) Our God is always right on time. He knows exactly what we need, and he can be trusted to reveal the light of Christ in order to push back the darkness in our lives. In a land full of deep darkness, a light has indeed dawned. I want to invite you to express your hope in God this morning by bringing him the things that way heavy on your heart. I am going to begin our prayer together and then offer you a moment of silence to speak to God, and then I will close us in prayer.

### **Prayer**

Father God, we come to you this morning in need of hope—hope that you are faithful and have provided all we need by sending your Son to us. We ask that the light of his life would shine into our lives and lift our heads. We offer to you the areas of our lives where we need your presence. (silent prayer) We trust you today with our very lives, and we look forward to seeing how you will come through. Thank you for the hope that can only come from you. Thank you for showing us the heart of Christmas. Amen.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How would you define hope in your own words?
2. How is Jesus' birth the fulfillment of long-awaited hope?
3. Why is it so hard to wait on God to move in our lives?

4. How has God been faithful in your life?
5. How does that strengthen your trust in Him?