

Christmas in a Minor Key Isaiah 1-9

Intro – We had a couple of musical practices last week in preparation for this month's worship music. And something that I noticed is that I had chosen what seemed like to me a greater number of songs in minor keys than our normal average. Maybe it is just me, but it seems that even some of the Christmas songs that are in major keys use a lot of minor chords. Now, all of you musicians can correct me if I'm wrong after the sermon, but for now, just go along with me.

I think that there are some good reasons why there are a number of Christmas carols and songs in minor keys. Perhaps it is because Christmas is a great mystery, and the minor chords highlight the mystery of the incarnation. Another reason could be that Jesus wasn't born into the grand halls of power, or the golden palace of wealth. He was born in a dark stable, into a poverty stricken family, in a nation that was under the oppression of Rome. Although, the birth of Christ is a climax of joy in the history of the world, it is a beautiful ringing note of delight, at the same time, there is a minor tone to part of the story.

It is my hope this Christmas season to preach 5 sermons on the Messiah from Isaiah, mostly from **Isaiah 9.6...**

*For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

But this morning, we are going to get the background of that beautiful passage by giving an overview of Isaiah 1-9, then we're going to dive into some of the historical details in Isaiah 8, and then see how the birth of the Messiah impacts and changes things in history and in the world today.

Now the reason that I started off by talking about minor keys in Christmas music is that the minor tones are predominate in this section of Isaiah! This was not a happy time in the history of Israel. So let's begin...

Overview of Isaiah 1-9

Isaiah 1 speaks bluntly about the wickedness of God's people, Israel.

Isaiah 1:2 & 4

*Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the Lord has spoken:
"Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me..."*

*Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!*

*They have forsaken the Lord,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.*

Isaiah 2 talks about the glory of the latter days, but it also talks about the current reality of the sin of God's people and God's judgment on them. It also talks about the day of the Lord not so much in terms of rejoicing for Israel but a threat of God's judgment on the pride of man.

verse 2 - *It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,*

That sounds glorious doesn't it? But...

verse 6 & 8 - *For you have rejected your people,
the house of Jacob,
because they are full of things from the east
and of fortunetellers like the Philistines,
and they strike hands with the children of foreigners...*

*Their land is filled with idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their own fingers have made.*

verse 12 - *For the Lord of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low;*

By the time you get to the end of chapter 2, if you were an Israelite, you would know whether to be excited or scared to death!

Isaiah continues the theme of judgment in **chapter 3**...

Isaiah 3:1-3

¹*For behold, the Lord God of hosts
is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah
support and supply,
all support of bread,
and all support of water;*
²*the mighty man and the soldier,
the judge and the prophet,
the diviner and the elder,*
³*the captain of fifty
and the man of rank,
the counselor and the skillful magician
and the expert in charms.*

verses 8-9

⁸*For Jerusalem has stumbled,
and Judah has fallen,
because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord,
defying his glorious presence.*

⁹*For the look on their faces bears witness against them;
they proclaim their sin like Sodom;
they do not hide it.
Woe to them!
For they have brought evil on themselves.*

Isaiah 4 takes a break from the gloom and give the first hint of hope. There will be survivors, and they will be characterized by holiness. God's presence will return to the remnant of God's people. All of this will be through something, or better, Someone that Isaiah calls "the branch of the Lord."

verse 2 - *In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel.*

Isaiah 5 begins with a parable...

verses 1-2 - *...My beloved had a vineyard / on a very fertile hill.*

²*He dug it and cleared it of stones, / and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it, / and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes, / but it yielded wild grapes.*

And then God gives a detailed list of the "wild grapes" that Israel had borne...

verse 8 – greed

verses 11 & 22 – drunkenness

verse 18 – wanton pursuit of sin

verse 20 – calling evil good, and good evil

verse 21 – wise in their own eyes

verse 23 – pervert justice for bribes

Again, there's a break at **Isaiah 6**. This is where Isaiah sees a vision of the glory of God...

Isaiah 6:1-3 - ¹*In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.*

³*And one called to another and said:*

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!"*

But then, Isaiah hears the Lord ask for someone to volunteer to be His messenger to His people. Isaiah responds with "Here am I! Send me." But then God tells him that the people will continue to resist. Their eyes will be blind to the prophecy, their ears will be plugged to the truth until the land is laid waste in desolation.

Finally in **Isaiah 7**, the hammer falls...

Isaiah 7:1-2 - ¹*In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. ²When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.*

And although God saves them from these immediate enemies, King Ahaz foolishly makes an alliance with the Assyrians for protection against his enemies instead of trusting in God.

And **Isaiah 8** is right back to predicting more doom and gloom because of this foolish alliance and lack of trust in God. So we are going to pick up our reading here at **chapter 8**, and I'm going to be pausing along the way to make a few historical comments...

Isaiah 8 - Then the LORD said to me, "Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters, 'Belonging to Maher-shalal-hashbaz.' ²And I will get reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah, to attest for me."

³And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Call his name Maher-shalal-hashbaz; ⁴for before the boy knows how to cry 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria."

So the Lord is speaking to Isaiah and using this word, this strange name Maher-shalal-hashbaz to illustrate the fact that God is going to defeat Judah's enemies before this little child can grow up enough to say "mama" or "dada". The name actually means "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens". In other words, the enemies of Judah are going to be speedily defeated. And yet at the same time, the name itself sound ominous even to the people of God at the time.

⁵The LORD spoke to me again: ⁶"Because this people have refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, ⁷therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, ⁸and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel."

⁹Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered;

give ear, all you far countries;

strap on your armor and be shattered;

strap on your armor and be shattered.

¹⁰Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing;

speak a word, but it will not stand,

for God is with us.

This time, when God speaks to Isaiah there is a note of irony. Judah would see their enemies defeated by Assyria, but the "river" of Assyria that would defeat Rezin king of Syria would also overflow and flood Judah as well. So there is temporary victory for God's people(vs. 10), but eventual defeat.

¹¹For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: ¹²"Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. ¹³But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. ¹⁴And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁵And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."

Now God is warning Isaiah not to associate with the wickedness of Israel or Judah. Fear God, not the enemies of Israel or the enemies of God. God is like a rock. You may stumble on it, you may fall and be broken upon the rock, but you will not move it or change it or crush it. God is the ultimate Victor in this scene.

And now Isaiah has a message from God for those few faithful people of God among wicked nation of Judah.

¹⁶Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples.

(Only those who are really willing to listen and obey are to receive this message.)

¹⁷I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. ¹⁸Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. ¹⁹And when they say to you, "Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers

who chirp and mutter," should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? ²⁰To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. ²¹They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward. ²²And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.

This whole section ends in despair – listen to these words “distress and darkness... gloom of anguish... thick darkness.” This is serious doom and gloom. Historically speaking, this meant military invasion, captivity, and bondage. But Isaiah 9 turns the page, it changes the key of the song, it sheds a different light on things...

Isaiah 9 - ¹But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali (*the two regions first overrun by the Assyrians*), but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.

³You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

⁴For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Now all of that introduction and history to bring us to the one main point of this passage and of Christmas: **All the gloom and doom of conquest and captivity can be changed into light and joy, all the**

sin can be forgiven, all the judgment can be turned to pardon, all the foolishness can be changed to wisdom, all the defeat can be turned into victory... ALL BECAUSE A LITTLE BABY IS TO BE BORN!

The answer for Isaiah and His time, is the same as the answer for us and our time, all the darkness and destruction around us and in our hearts and homes can only be challenged by the power of that little Baby born in Bethlehem.

Now, I realize that so far all I've really done is set the stage, but let's take the time that we have left and unpack the truth of this passage for our lives...

Here are 6 lessons that we can learn...

1. God's people are able to stare the darkness of this world in the face...

- a. Isaiah, God's prophet, and those few faithful people still in the land were not burying their heads in the sand. The message of Isaiah is one of judgment, and he doesn't shrink from that.
- b. When we look out on the scene of our nation and the world, there is some very real darkness. And we should be realistic about it.
- c. But we should also recognize that the darker the background, the brighter our light should shine. Isaiah lived in some very dark days, however, the product of His faithfulness during very dark times was the beautiful and powerful book of Isaiah. Our light of faithfulness to God and obedience to His will should be burning bright against the background of the darkness of our world.

2. God's people wait on the Lord even when His face is hidden from us...

- a. Did you notice **8.17** as we went through that chapter? Isaiah says, "I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in Him." It takes faith to be able to wait on the Lord when the smile of His face isn't upon you.
- b. But Isaiah had learned a very important lesson. GOD is more important to us than His blessings. If we get that backwards, if we are only seeking God because we want His blessings, then when circumstances are tough, we will lose our hope. But if we realize that what is most important is God Himself, then if we go through a time of waiting, if we experience troubles, even if our nation is overcome by some enemy, we will still have God! We may lose the blessing of God, simply because of the wickedness of our nation, but God's true followers will still have faith and hope because they have God Himself!

3. God's people turn to the Word of the living God... 8.20 –

- a. There are a couple of places in this text that indicate the importance of the Word of God to His people during times of distress.
- b. **Verse 19** is about how to respond when people encourage us to see information and revelation from the wrong sources... "And when they say to you, 'Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter,' should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?" There were people around Isaiah who were contacting demons and seeking to have communication from the dead. They were so fearful that they had to have some hope or encouragement, and they were looking for it in all the wrong places! Compared to seeking God and His truth, trying to get information from the ancient version of palm readers and psychics is like getting a message that is all garbled and just a bunch of gibberish.

- c. What does Isaiah recommend as an alternative? **Verse 20 – “TO THE TEACHING AND TO THE TESTIMONY!”** We couldn’t ask for a better challenge to seek the Lord during dark days through reading and teaching and understanding God’s Word!
- d. In dark days, our foundation will be secure if it is the Word of God!
- e. **Transition** – Now when we consider these things regarding God’s true people, we have to admit that this is not everybody. Not everybody is able to stare the dark reality of this world in the eyes. Not everybody that claims to follow God is willing to continue to wait on Him and hope in Him even when the darkness seems to fall. And not everybody that claims to be a Christian is really basing their lives on the Word of God. And that brings up this important point...

4. God’s true people are a remnant...

- a. Back in **chapter 8 verse 16** I pointed out that God had a message that was only for His faithful followers among all the nation of Judah...
“Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples.”
- b. This passage is the only place in the Old Testament where this word **disciples** or the word **disciple** is used. It is not a word that is used to refer to the whole nation of Israel. It is a word that is used for those among Israel that are truly faithful to God.
- c. Its basic meaning is “learner”, and in this context it means those who are taught in the law of God.
- d. There is another word that is used more often in the Old Testament to mean basically the same thing: **remnant**. When God used the word **remnant** He was talking about a small group of people who remained faithful to Him during times of great apostasy. They were pure, they were faithful, and here we learn that they are students of God’s Word, but they were small in number.
- e. During times of darkness, God always preserves a remnant people, true disciples, faithful people of the Word of God to carry His message and serve Him through the difficult days.
- f. The question for us is, are we part of that group of true disciples? Are we the kind of people who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, have the “holy grit” to stay true when everyone else in compromising. We are remnant people?
- g. **Transition** – (Illustration – Just before the final battle in Lord of the Rings, Gimli the dwarf says this, “... certainty of death, small chance of success... what are we waiting for!”) That’s like these faithful disciples of the Lord. There is a reason why this small band of faithful people have the grit to wait on God when it seems like He has turned His face away, and are able to stay true to God’s Word in the face of severe opposition, and why they are able to not flinch when they see the sinking darkness of reality around them. And it is because...

5. God’s people are able to see the reality behind the “reality” ...

- a. Did you catch God’s warning to Isaiah and this faithful band of people in **verses 12-15**?
Isaiah 8:12-15 - "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. ¹³But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. ¹⁴And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁵And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."
- b. There was a reality behind the “reality”. Everybody was looking around and seeing “conspiracy” and were in dread and fear. God says you don’t need to fear anything but ME!
- c. For those who feared God, He would be their sanctuary.

- d. For those who didn't fear God and feared all the darkness around them, God would become a stone of stumbling, a trap, and a snare.
- e. God is saying that if you are true to Him, there is no danger you can't face. But if you aren't following Him, the very next step you take is extremely dangerous.
- f. Isaiah and the others could see that God was at work, even in the gloom and captivity around them. The gloom, captivity, and darkness were not the ultimate reality.
- g. And the same is true for us if we will open our eyes to see it. There is plenty in our world to be discouraged about. In our lifetimes our own nation has abandoned God and the principles of His Word. The fall of Communism in our lifetime has been a good thing, but it has been more than matched by the horror of radical Islam. The news from the Middle East is Iran this, Iraq that. Nuclear missiles and suicide bombers.
- h. But all of that is not the ultimate reality! God is! God is yet at work. And God is the ultimate Victor.
- i. God overcomes the darkness by light, the gloom with joy, oppression by deliverance, and war with peace!

6. The dark reality of this world will be fully and finally changed... because of a little Baby that was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago!

- a. In **chapter 9** the whole tone changes. (We do this sometimes with our music here at church. We'll sing a song that is in a minor key, but on the last verse, on the last chord, our instrumentalists will resolve to a major key, so that we don't end the song on a downer.) And here in chapter 9 the key changes from minor to major.
 - i. verse 3 – joy, fruitfulness, victory
 - ii. verse 4 – deliverance – There is no more yoke of burden, no more rod of the oppressor.
 - iii. verse 5 – peace - The combat boots and the garments stained with the battle will be burned in the fireplace to keep the family warm.
- b. And all of this because **verse 6** – “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.”
- c. Which means that there must be something incredibly special about this baby! And that is what we are going to be talking about for the next several weeks! He is...
 - i. Wonderful Counselor
 - ii. Mighty God
 - iii. Everlasting Father
 - iv. Prince of Peace
- d. Everything changes when Jesus comes on the scene!

Conclusion – Steve Brown is a radio Bible teacher, seminary professor, and former pastor. He tells the story of how he and his wife and their German shepherd rode out Hurricane Andrew in Miami, FL. He tells how his neighbor did everything right. He got everything boarded up and battened down. Steve didn't bother. And it turned out that the storm was much worse than he expected. When the storm blew in it was bad. So he told his wife, when the eye of the storm comes through and we get a little break, we're going to rush over to the neighbors and ride out the rest of the storm at their house. And he said, that when they opened the front door to do that, they looked across the street and their neighbor's house wasn't even there!

This was one bad storm. When the rest of the storm came through, their roof blew off. They thought that they were going to die! They went from room to room to room, Steve and his wife and their dog looking for the most stable place in the house. They finally settled into a closet. And you know what

that German Shepherd did? He brought a ball and dropped it in Steve's lap. He wanted to play! He was OK because he was with Steve, his master. And you know what we are going to be OK because our Master is with us!!!

The Babe in Bethlehem was born, and that changes everything. It changed history, it changed the world and it still changes the world, and it will change you and me as well.

Now, at this point in Isaiah, the cross isn't in focus. That comes later, in Isaiah 53. For now, the Child is born, and His throne and government are explained. From Isaiah's perspective Christ's birth guaranteed His reign. And we too can look forward to the reign of Jesus in our world. We can be grateful that He is on the throne and that He is coming back!

But from our vantage point, we can never let the cross get out of our vision. We know that between the manger and the throne was the path of Golgotha! Christmas is in a minor key because Christmas leads to the cross. And this morning in communion, we are going to not only remember the birth of Christ, but the cross that He bore. My friends, Jesus is able to change the hell around us in this dark world because He took hell on Calvary for us! -- Prayer...

We are going to prepare our hearts for communion by singing Rose of Bethlehem. This song helps us keep the connection between the manger and the cross. Jesus was...

Born to glorify the Father
Born to wear the thorns for me