

GOING DEEPER
DISCUSSION GUIDE
December 21, 2014

Hope lives



Discussion Guide

Hope for a Broken World

Isaiah 9.1-7

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Do you feel that the world is getting better or worse? Would you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Explain the context for Isaiah 9 using the notes.
- Read Isaiah 9.1-7 aloud, slowly. Reread Isaiah 9.1-7 once more.
- In what ways does God promise to address the brokenness of the world?
- What are the effects of God's movement?
- In Isaiah 9, God promises to address broken systems which exist in the world. Where do you see broken systems today?
- Reflect and react to the following statement, "Broken systems break people. Whole systems heal people."
- God's promise to correct the systems which crush people is a source of hope. What, if anything, makes this hope difficult to grasp?

- What might make grasping and living out this hope possible?
- What, if anything, might change if you began to live with the hope that God was in the process of righting the world?
- Conclude with a time of prayer, asking God to grant you and your group the grace to grasp the hope which is found in the promise of God to address this world's brokenness.

Context and Background

Oppression

Oppression is the sin of behaving inhumanely toward another person. It involves the violation of basic human rights and dignity, including exploitation, repression, and robbery of self-worth and identity. Oppression typically is found within the context of an imbalance of power with those who possess power utilizing it to subjugate others. Oppression may occur through the conscious efforts to hold others back or down. This type of oppression is generally driven by motives of fear, greed, pride, or prejudice and includes such forms as segregation, slave trafficking, gender discrimination, and workplace harassment. Oppression may also occur in unconscious ways through the construction of systems (intended or unintended) which have negative spiritual, emotional, economic, or political consequences. Unintended forms of oppression can include aspects of the modern welfare system, debt, economic disparity, tax structures, and performance-based parenting.

The existence of oppression (along with all injustice and brokenness) may be traced back to the rejection of God and the outworkings of this rejection (Genesis 3; Romans 1.18-21). Because oppression is linked to the existence of Sin within the world, God's redemptive movement clearly addresses the removal of oppression (Colossians 1.16-20; Isaiah 9.4-5; 58.1-14; 61.1-3; Luke 4.16-19). Evangelicals have typically sought to spiritualize these passages in order to downplay these texts which speak of God's redemption including the social aspects of worldly systems and attitudes. They emphasize that God is primarily interested in the spiritual lives of people. However, Scripture makes no such distinction between the spiritual and physical life. People experience both the spiritual and social dimensions of life simultaneously and the two cannot be separated.

Most of these attempts to de-emphasize God's promises to deal with oppression have their roots in an over-reaction to what has been labeled the Social Gospel Movement. This movement rightly understands that God has addressed and called his people to address injustice (Isaiah 58). However, it wrongly understands that this can be done apart from the power of God and the reconciling work of the cross.

A more holistic and biblically-based approach understands that God is the main motivator behind the redemptive movement in the world and that he alone makes it possible through the work of Jesus. He invites his people, the Church, to join in what he is doing to bring the effects of the reconciling work of the cross to the world, which includes both the spiritual and social dimension, including oppression. God's purpose is to reconcile all things and all people so that his intentions for creation might be restored (Colossians 1.16-20; Revelation 21.5).

The Text

Isaiah 9.1-5: *The promise of deliverance*

In Isaiah 8, Isaiah describes the outcome of a life lived apart from God (Isaiah 9.20). Such a life results in distress, hunger, rage, and darkness, and it deforms the created order in such a way that distress, fear, and darkness mark the world itself. While Isaiah is specifically addressing those who turn from God to mediums and spiritists (Isaiah 8.19), one cannot help but hear echoes of the outworkings of people's fundamental rejection of God (Genesis 3; Romans 1.18-32).

Rather than abandoning those who have abandoned him, God promises that the darkness (personally and within the created order) will end. The gloom and distress will come to an end (Isaiah 9.1). While the distress has been very real, the fortunes of the land itself will be reversed. Isaiah mentions the northernmost provinces of Israel, Zebulun and Naphtali, which suffered horrendous destruction at the hands of the Assyrians in 734-733 B.C. The land was destroyed, the people exiled, and a completely new people settled within the land in such a way that it ceased to be Israel and became Galilee of the nations (Gentiles). It is important to note that Isaiah does not focus (at this point) upon people but upon the land itself. The land has suffered because of the choices of people and it is the land that will be restored.

The restoration of the land has an effect upon the people who live within it. Life grows and flourishes as the nation expands rather than declining in population. Joy fills the hearts of people rather than fear. A level of rejoicing takes place which is not unlike the rejoicing over a bountiful harvest. These things take place, because, in the restoration of the land, oppression and oppressive systems have been destroyed. Isaiah refers to the defeat of Midian, a people who oppressed Israel during the time of the Judges (Judges 6-7). In the same way that God destroyed the oppression of the Midianites before Gideon, he has destroyed the oppression of the land. He has removed the power (rod) of the oppressor and destroyed the hope of oppression's return, for he has banished forever violence and war (Isaiah 9.5).

Isaiah 9.6-7: *The means of deliverance*

The means of God's deliverance are as surprising as the message that oppression will cease. God promises to move through a child who will establish a new series of systems and a new type of governance. His rule will be marked by what seems to be an impossible juxtaposition of power and mercy. On the one hand, he is wonderfully wise. He knows how to do things properly. On the other hand, he has incredible power, for he is Mighty God. Power and the right ordering of things rarely go together. Usually power is used to harm or oppress people, but not with this rule. Further, he is the Everlasting Father; that is, he has an eternal position of authority. However, he is willing to be viewed, not as the one in charge, but as the one who humbles himself to bring peace. Position and peace rarely go together, at least not for those who have no position! Typically, position and influence are used to secure privilege for those who fill the position, but not with this child. This child would have the power to overthrow all that was wrong within the land, but he would have the gentleness to create a healing form of governance and systems.

While the fear might be that such a good ruler would come and go, the promise is that this ruler would come and stay. He would reign over his kingdom upholding justice and righteousness (the right way!) for all time. Such a promise seems impossible, beyond the reach of people, but it is not beyond the reach of God. God himself promises to accomplish this and he is driven by a zealous fury to make sure that it is accomplished.

Real life with Blake:

The world is broken. Everywhere I look, I see systems and forms of governance which are oppressive. Some are intended, like bullying, racism, and sexism. Others are unintended, but equally as oppressive, such as workplace micromanagement, welfare systems, tax structures, and debt. I am surrounded by things that are not the way they should be. I am constantly reminded that the fundamental choice to reject God spills over beyond my life to the world itself. As the world itself is affected, my life is further impacted. I live under these systems. I experience the burden of a growing oppressive tax system. I have tasted the effects of racism. I have watched the demoralizing and dehumanizing power of a welfare system which penalizes people for working or marrying. The world is broken and its brokenness further breaks me. I am coming to recognize that God intends to rescue me and that his rescue involves rescuing the world. I cannot be free from the effects of sin until the world in which I live is free from its effects. God does not promise to do away with this world, but he promises to transform it. He promises to destroy systems of oppression and replace them with new ways of being and leading which are marked by grace and truth and mercy. While this gives me a measure of hope, I wonder when it will or if it will ever take place. If this is what God desires to do, why is he taking so long? I don't know if I have come to a satisfactory answer for this, but what I do know is that God has not been silent. He has already begun to move. The one promised has come and in him the world itself has been overcome (John 16.33). What I see and experience around me is running on borrowed time. Its power has been stripped. A new foundation has been laid. While I do not fully see what will be, I know that God is moving and that he will not stop until he is finished because he is passionate about finishing. So I have hope as I wait for him to finish.

Real life with you:

The world is broken. It is full of systems and forms of governances that are stilted and lopsided. Some of these have been built intentionally, some unintentionally. Regardless, the effects are the same. Broken systems break people as if it wasn't enough that the effects of our rejection of God destroy us. This rejection creates systems and ways of being that further demoralize, dehumanize, and objectify us. The workplace crushes us. The tax system crushes us. Gender and racial bias crush us. Economic disparity crushes us. Debt crushes us. Performance-based parenting crushes us. If we are to have any hope of a life that is better, then somehow, this world must get better. The hope we have is that God has promised to make it better, and not just better but whole! God has promised that he will move to remove broken structures and then rebuild structures and forms of governance that are good and just and merciful. He promises to send one (Jesus) who will create a world that will give life rather than take it. His promise has been fulfilled (John 16.33), and yet we do not yet see the fullness of his promise. Christ has overcome the world but we wait for the fullness of that overcoming to work its way through life as we know it, but we wait with hope. We wait with hope, for we know that God will not stop until he has completed what he started because he is passionate about finishing!

This week, consider taking some time to turn your attention to God as the one who is the hope for this world, the one who is creating a world that gives life rather than taking it. You might consider memorizing and meditating on Psalm 16. This is a wonderful psalm to make part of your daily rhythms, for it turns our attention to God as the source of life. Spend the week memorizing this psalm and then seek to pray through the psalm several times a day as a means of turning your face to God, the source of our hope.



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