

[Exploring My Strange Bible E2 Transcript]

Tim: Hey, everybody. I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, Exploring My Strange Bible. I am a card-carrying Bible, history, and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 20 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called the BibleProject. We make animated videos, and podcasts, and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at BibleProject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[Musical Break (00:55—1:00)]

Tim: All right. Well, in this episode, we are going to explore a number of passages from the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. This was part of a—an Advent series, but it—th—it was kind of a standalone message the week before Christmas—kind of the culmination of Advent. And it's a reflection on the meaning of hope in the Old Testament Scriptures and the meaning of biblical hope. And what a profound and important thing hope is as a virtue almost to cultivate. It's something that God's people have to actively build and cultivate as they go throughout their lives. And the hope for the Messiah in the Old Testament was a kind of hope that, actually, followers of Jesus still need to be anticipating, even though that he's come and done the first main stage of his deal. There's still a lot more yet to be fulfilled in the promise of his return. And so that's what we focus on, is how—uh—what you hope for shapes what you live for. So there you go—book of Isaiah. Buckle up, and let's learn together.

[Musical Break (2:03—2:13)]

Tim: So this is uh—the—the eggnog that I grew up drinking having grown up here in Portland, and this is, you know, part of the holiday season. Fans of eggnog in the room? Fans? Fans? Anybody not a fan?

[Laughter and Cheering]

Tim: So one of—uh—one of the best—uh—names that I heard—uh—eggnog called this season—Simon, spiked custard mucus, was it?

[Laughter]

Tim: Yeah, there we go.

[Laughter]

Tim: Spiked custard mucus. I'll leave—this isn't spiked. So—anyhow, there you go. Uh—so I'm going to just pour myself a—a sick helping here. Frothy egg, nutmeg, sugar—just leave it right there. Look at that, you guys.

[Laughter]

Tim: All right. That's a glass of eggnog. Do you guys mind? Do you guys mind?

[Laughter]

Tim: I picked a food illustration tonight because I forgot to bring a lunch today. So—

[Laughter]

Tim: Anyway. So there you go. I have—uh—I have filled the—uh—this cup half—uh—half—half with eggnog. So you would say this cup is what? Half—

Crowd: Full—[Murmurs of answers]

[Laughter]

Tim: Okay, right. So most of you said full. There's a minority among you who said empty. So—

[Laughter]

Tim: Uh—half full—half full and half empty. Now I'm kind of being silly here. Really, this was just an excuse to get to drink some eggnog during the sermon.

[Laughter]

Tim: But at the same time—uh—this is kind of a well-known—it's like a little thought experiment for determining personality types. Right? So a person who looks at this glass right here and sees that it is half full, these are typically called optimists. Optimists, right? Not Optimus. That's a transformer. Optimus Prime, right?

[Laughter]

Tim: So optimists. So optimists, they look at a situation and they look at the same set of facts and, you know, they see kind of the bright side of things, how things are likely to improve or to get better, to work out for the benefit of all or something. They just tend—you know, that's how they see events going. That's how they interpret their

circumstances. People—uh—who identify the glass as half empty are typically called pessimists. So—and again, this is very broad generalities. But in—you know, pessimists, they look at the same set of circumstances and they—they see that things are going to be much more complex than anyone realized. Things are likely not to work out. Things are going to probably go worse than anybody expects, especially from—for the pessimist, right?

[Laughter]

Tim: Especially, like, for themselves. So that's kind of the main, you know, way of—uh—distinguishing these two—uh—per—personality types. Now take it for what it is. Probably some people are mixes of both. But I think it's interesting. And what's interesting also is I think this time of year tends to accentuate people's personality types towards optimism or towards pessimism. Some of us love Christmas. We love just the festivity and the cheer and the treats or whatever. And we just like it. And we enjoy being around our families or friends, or whatever. We like this kind of thing. There are others of us who, for various different reasons, this time of year accentuates—accentuates our pessimism, right? And we kind of see through it all—superficial—it's just about buying presents or whatever and—but like, you've got to go be around your family, which you don't really like, you know, or whatever. And there's different—for some of us, our personalities get accentuated this time of year. Now here's an interesting question. And—uh—we're going—we're going to look at tonight one of the most famous kind of Christmas passages in the Old Testament prophets. And—uh—the passage raises the question here—that's also why I have this little silly jar of eggnog in my hands—is it—say I'm a follower of Jesus. What—what is—uh—what's the mindset that I should adopt? What is the mindset that's the most consistent with what it means to be a Christian, optimism or pessimism? What do you think? See, that's interesting, isn't it? It's actually—it's actually not a very simple—uh—question to answer because you—you say: Okay, pessimism, it seems, is off the table in the sense that there are many horrible things that happen in the world. But our core confession as a—as a community of Jesus is in a God who has come among us to identify, participate in our suffering and in our hardship, and to absorb the pain and the sin of the world into himself and the cross and to conquer its power through his love and the resurrection from the dead. It seems to me that to believe and to confess allegiance to that kind of God means that if there's—if this is a being that can conquer death through the power of—of his love and—and grace, that ultimate pessimism is—is off the table, it seems to me. But I would actually also argue that optimism should be off the table too, in the sense that optimism is—is naive. If—if we truly take to heart what the Scriptures are

telling, both in—in the stories they tell and the—in the poetry and so on, exploring the depths of—of just the brokenness, the selfishness of the sinful human heart. And—and it's not just the Scriptures. I mean, just look at human history or something. We just—if you are over 12 years old, you were born in the 1900s, which means that you were—congratulations. You were born in, like, the bloodiest, most murderous century in all of human history, you know? That's our legacy as people born in the 20th century. It—it doesn't seem like things are getting better. And we have—and we have a week like we just had in our—in our country—right—where we have two—two acts—random, senseless acts of evil, right? Two young men who—whatever the story is—we don't know the stories yet—but they—they succumbed to deep lies about themselves, about other people. They took their own lives and a lot of other people with them. And it's just—this just happens. Evil just erupts in our world, and it doesn't seem to be getting better. So it seems like optimism is naive, but pessimism is off the table because of the reality of the Gospel and the resurrection of Jesus. And so what the passage that we're going to look at explore, I think, offers us a third way, and it's a way that takes into account the realities of—of both. It's what the biblical authors call hope. Hope. Biblical or Christian hope. If I'm a Christian, I'm not an optimist or a pessimist. I'm a person of hope. And hope is different than optimism. It's different. And this, kind of, was—uh—this struck me—uh—a while back—uh—as I was reading a—a passage. It was in a—an interview. It was in the Rolling Stone magazine, and I was with—uh—a guy named Cornel West. I don't know if you've heard of him. He's a—he's a professor of religious studies, African-American studies, at Harvard. And—uh—this is the—I'm going to show you the section of the quote here. I also want to show it to you because his hair is amazing. Right? So—

[Laughter]

Tim: I want you to see his hair, too. He says, "Optimism and hope are different. Optimism tends to be based on the notion that there's enough evidence out there that allows us to think that things are going to get better. It's much more rational, and it's deeply secular. Whereas, hope looks at the evidence and says, 'It doesn't look good at all, but I'm going to make a leap of faith. I'm going to go beyond the evidence in the attempt to dream new possibilities.' Hope is based on dreams that become contagious enough to allow us to engage in heroic actions against the odds. That is hope." Now—uh—I might and you might quibble with a few different things of—of what he's saying here. What I thought was most interesting is his description of optimism as rational and secular, and a very different from any kind of religious hope based on faith. An—and I think—I—that seems right. That resonates with the message of the Scriptures. Because

what he's saying is optimism is based on my circumstances. If I can look at the evidence around me and I can s—I can interpret it in a way that says, “Yeah,” like, “things are likely go—going to improve.” “I can look at my life circumstances and I can kind of see the movement towards things getting better,” and so on. That's fine as far as it goes. But what do you do when there is no evidence that things are going to get better, right? What do you do when the evidence of your life or the world around you points exactly in the opposite direction—that things are not getting better, things are getting much, much worse? Where are you at then? And see, this is where I think a very—a robust, profound view of—of Christian hope can stand on its own two legs because Christian hope is not based on my circumstances. Christian hope is—is a vision of hope that keeps—that keeps my heart and my mind alert and alive to what God is doing in the world, and it has nothing to do with how well my life is going or how well the world is going. Is wh—and it seems to me it's that kind of hope that we and our world desperately needs. And it's the kind of hope explored in the—in the passage we're going to look at here tonight. I want you to turn in your Bibles with me to the book of Isaiah—the book of Isaiah chapter nine. And—uh—it's right in the middle of your Old Testament. It might be one of those times you need to use your table of contents in your Bible. Go for it. No shame whatsoever. Isaiah nine might take a second, so allow me to imbibe. Mhm. Isaiah chapter nine—and we're going to—uh—dive in at—in verse one. We're exploring the nature of biblical hope. Biblical hope. Isaiah nine, verse one: “But there will be no more gloom for the one who was in anguish. In the former times, he brought into contempt the land of Zevulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter times, he makes glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.” All clear?

[Laughter]

Tim: Right? What? No, this is not clear, is it? Is it? What on Earth? What? Who? So there's gloom, former time, latter time, something to do with the land of Zevulun—whatever. And you're like, “Who—whose Zevulun—who would name their kid Zevulun?” You know what I'm saying? Like, what on Earth is happening here? So this is a challenge—welcome to reading the He—the ancient Hebrew prophets, right? So you're kind of thrown into the midst of stories and poetry, and you—and you're like, “Who? What? When? Where? I don't know. I don't know.” So that's okay. So we're going to stop for a moment and reflect on who—who, what, when, and where. Uh—the—this book of poetry is a—is a collection that's connected to what prophet, obviously? Isaiah. So Isaiah—uh—he comes onto the scene of Israel about halfway through the kingdom period. Israel's first—uh—well, actually it's second, but most famous king of Israel, King

David—Isaiah comes about 250 years after David. And so Isaiah's on the scene and he's on the scene at a pretty dark—uh—a dark chapter in Israel's history. For the most part, the last 250 years and the couple hundred years that are to follow of the—of David's kingdom, the Israelite kingdom, they're dark years because Israel on the whole—there are a few good kings, but not very many—on the whole, Israel's kings and the people, they've abandoned the covenant that they made with Yahweh, the God who redeemed them out of Exodus and so on—out of—uh—Egypt and—and slavery and so on—brought them into the—into the land. And so they set up a kingdom in the land, and things are not going well. The kings—for the most part, they abandon Yahweh. They worship other gods. So do the people. The kings and the people allow the very types of injustice and neglect of the poor, the very things that, in the covenant they made with Yahweh at Sinai, they said they wouldn't do these things or allow these things. It's precisely what they allow and what they do. And so Isaiah's role in the book is to warn the people. To warn them. First of all, to call them on the carpet for what the—what they're doing. To remind them that God rescued them by his grace out of Egypt and so on. And then he calls them to obey the terms of the covenant. And if they don't obey the terms of the covenant, then—this was the role of the prophets to—to warn the people that Yahweh would give them over to the consequences of their decisions and that Yahweh would allow various—various means of—uh—calling his people to—to justice and so on for violating the covenant. In Isaiah's day, the—the decisions they were making were just steamrolling them right into the face of the big bad empire of their—in Isaiah's day. What's the big bad empire in Isaiah's day? Almost. Almost. This is good Bible trivia. That was a tricky question. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that to you. So—

[Laughter]

Tim: Uh—Assyria. Assyria is the big bad empire in Isaiah's day. And so what he's referring to here—if you look back down to verse one, he's referring to an event that was taking place in his lifetime. The big bad nation of Assyria was going to come and to bring into shame and contempt and to bring gloom on these lands that we mentioned here, the land of Zevulun, the land of Naphtali, and so on. What's he talking about? It—it's actually—what he's talking about is an event that took place in his lifetime, and that's talked about elsewhere in—uh—the Old—Old Testament. This is a bit of, like, biblical, kind of, history lesson and so on, but it's crucial to make sense of what's happening in the passage. This is the event that Isaiah is talking about. It's—uh—recorded in Second Kings chapter 15. The king of Assyria is going to come into the land of Israel and just take out this northern region called Galilee that you see here. So Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, and the region to the north was called—uh—the region of—of Galilee. And

so this is the event that he—that he sees on the horizon. “During the reign of Pekah, king of Israel, the king of Assyria, Tiglat Pileser—”what his parents were thinking when they named him—no idea. Right?

[Laughter]

Tim: So—so he—uh—“He attacked Israel again and he captured the towns of *Iyon*, *Avelbeth-Maakah*, *Yannoa*, *Kedesh*, and *Khatsor*. He also conquered the regions of Gilead, Galilee, and all of Naphtali, and he took the people to Assyria as captives.” Now look at the—some of the place names up there, and look at Isaiah nine, verse one. Do you see some overlap there? Yeah, they were talking about the Galilee, the—the land of Naphtali. This was the land of where the tribes of Naphtali and Zevulun were given their inheritance and so on. This was the very region that the king of Assyria came, invaded, took over all the towns, annexed it, and deported all of the Israelites who were living there. This would be—so the equivalent in our day would be like Canada—

[Laughter]

Tim: So it’s—I don’t know why it’s funny, but I don’t—so I don’t—so—but Canada gets aggressive for whatever reason. They invade the state of Washington or something like that. I don’t—why is this funny? I don’t know why it’s funny.

[Laughter]

Tim: It was funny at the last service, too. I don’t know.

[Laughter]

Tim: So you know, but ser—I mean, really try and imagine it because this stuff happens in human history. It still happens today. Right? One people group invades the land of another. All of the population is deported. You have aunts and uncles. You have related extended family. Gone. They’re gone. They’re deported. Just deported far, far away. You



never see them again ever. This invasion of Assyria was what wiped most of the tribes of Israel off of the map of history till this very day. This was—this was one of the most tragic events to hit the people of Israel in their entire history. And it's a result, Isaiah says, of their horrible decisions in abandoning Yahweh and faithfulness to Yahweh. They're working out the consequences of their decisions. And so—so yeah in—in chapter nine, verse one, Isaiah refers to this. He says, "In the former time, he—"that is, Yahweh—"he let this land fall into shame and contempt and gloom." But is that the end of the story? Is that the last word? What does he say? That was in the past, but what about the future? He says, "In the latter times though, he's going to honor—"or—or make glorious this same exact region. In other words, in Isaiah's day, he sees that Israel's sin has led to this region of Israel being devastated, but that's not the final word. When you're dealing with the God of the Scriptures, human sin and rebellion never gets the last word. God's—God's purpose to bless, to save, and to restore always, always gets the last word. And so in the future, in the latter days, he's going to honor this same region of land. How? How? Let's keep reading. Verse two: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined." So Assyria kind of comes into the land and—and devastates the land. It's like somebody turned the lights off and, just, things go pitch black. Right? And you can imagine what all these different Israelites are thinking, right? "Where is God? What's—where's—what's God's role in this devastation?" You know, like, "What—is he ab—is God asleep at the wheel?" Like, "What's happening? What about his promises to Abraham and so on?" Like, "Where is God? Where is God?" The lights are turned out. But that's not the last word. He says, "For those sitting in the darkness, a light is going to turn back on again. A bright—a bright light." What is the light? What is it? When and what? When's it going to happen, and what's it going to be when Yahweh turns the lights back on again? And here—uh—Isaiah just comes into his own as a—as a poet here. Th—the—the metaphors, the images, are just going to spill and stumble over one an—an—another. It's such a beautiful poem. Verse three—here's what it's going to be like. He says, "You—you've multiplied the nation and you've increased its joy. They rejoice before you like the joy at—at the harvest. Like people are glad when they divide up the spoil." So—so Yahweh is going to—to restore the nation and its joy, and it's going to be like harvest time. So you—you know, you plant your seeds in the spring—or I mean, you water and you wait and you wait. You work, you tend to the ground, you weed, and so on. There's a lot of W's, right? I didn't think about that. Work, weed, water, wait, so on. Right? And—uh—and months and months and months go by. Patience. Patience. And then you begin to see your hope come into fruition and grow, and then the harvest time comes, and you have it. Right? You have your apples or your olives or whatever. It's the joy that you have seeing your hope fulfilled. Or it's joy—I—I like this metaphor—it's joy—uh—that—that characterizes people when they divide up plunder. So here he's describing, like, soldiers who just won a battle, and they're stoked because

they get all this free stuff. You know? Right? So—or think of like pirates—pirate booty and stuff like that, you know. Booty?

[Laughter]

Tim: I don't know. Why is i—again, why is that funny? Pirate's booty. We all know what I'm t—don't—don't read into my words. Come on. All right.

[Laughter]

Tim: So that's what it's like. It's like harvest time. It's like soldiers and pirates celebrating over the—the plunder. Verse four—why? Why? “Because the yoke of his burden—”Isr—Israel's burden—“the yoke of his burden, the staff on his shoulder, the—the rod of his oppressor, you have broken those things like—like on the day of—of Midian.” And we're all like, “Oh, yeah, the day of Midian.” Right?

[Laughter]

Tim: “Yeah, like that day.” So let's—he's referring to a—a well-known event in—uh—in Israel's story. This is the story of—of Gideon in the book of Judges and his little band of 300—uh—soldiers that overcomes a—an army of tens of thousands and so on with—

[Laughter]

Tim: With fire torches and clay pots.

[Laughter]

Tim: It's a wonderful story. Right? “And so—and so it's just like when we were rescued from the Midianite oppressors way back when. So Yahweh is going to deliver us from

the yoke.” He uses this image of, like, the heavy—uh—wooden, kind of U-shaped or W—uh—shaped thing that would set on the necks—across the necks of cattle. And then that would be attached to a plow, and it’s what you would use to harness the energy and so on. This was an image of slavery in the ancient world—is like people having these things—people treated like animals to—to benefit the well-being of the oppressor or the others. And—and—and Yah—God—uh—Isaiah says Yahweh is going to sha—he’s going to break the roke—break the yoke of the oppressor, shatter the rod, and so on, like in the day of Midian. Freedom. Freedom. Verse five: “For every boot of the trampling, every warrior in battle tumult, every garment rolled in blood, it will all be burned like fuel for the fire.” All of the boots and the clothes that are stained with blood from oppression and war, all of it done away with when Yahweh turns the lights back on. So it’s very rich poetry here. What’s he getting at?

[Laughter]

Tim: Right? So there’s some of you type-A people you’re like, “Okay, that’s really beautiful. What’s he talking about?” You know?

[Laughter]

Tim: So what’s he getting at? When? Why? What’s this—what is it going to be? Verses six and seven—this is what all the images refer to here. Some of you have this magnet on your refrigerator or something—

[Laughter]

Tim: Like that. Verse six and seven—it’s a famous Christmas verse: “For to us a child is born and to us a son is given and the government will be upon his shoulders and his name will be called—”and so let’s pause real quick here. So this is the—a—a child’s going to be born. This is going—and his birth is going to mean Yahweh turning the lights back on and joy at the harvest and freedom from slavery and an era of peace from war, and so on. A king, a royal child, is going to be born. He’s going to bear the government on his shoulders—the—the rule and the kingdom he’s going to carry. “And his name will b—will be called—”so he’s going to be called all these symbolic names now. If you’ve

read the Old Testament any length, people get all kinds of crazy sounding names. Right? Like we read, Tiglat Pileser, and Zevulun, whatever. But they're all—they all have meanings in—in Hebrew, which chare—it symbolizes their character or their destiny or what they're called to do and so on. So here are the symbolic names given to this royal king. He's called "Wonderful Counselor," which doesn't mean he's going to be a good therapist. He may be. He may be. Uh—that's what counsel—that was a joke. The—so "counselor" means that in American English. That's not what it means in—in the Scriptures. So counselor is referring to strategy—uh—esp—when it comes especially to military or political planning and so on. He's a king. He's a king. And so he's wise, and through strategy, he's going to be able to accomplish great wonders. He's a counselor of—a planner of wonderful acts and feats of salvation and deliverance and so on. He's a wonderful counselor. What else will the child be called here? Verse six: "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father." Hmm.

[Laughter]

Tim: Okay, who is called by those two names? Just—I mean, look at the rest of it. The—the child is called Mighty God and—and the Son is called Everlasting Father. What? What on Earth here? So Isaiah envisions that this child to be born will be the very embodiment of Israel's God, of his faithfulness, of his mercy, of his mission to bless and to save, and so on. This child will—will be the embodiment of the mighty God and the Father of eternity. How much he grasped the de—the depth of his poetry—right—and how it would prove true, we're not sure. But this is very powerful, very powerful. He will be the embodiment of Israel's God among his people. And what's the last name that the son is given? "Prince of Peace." A—and if—this is probably the one Hebrew word you do know. Yeah? Peace? So *shalom*. Yeah, *shalom*. *Shalom*. And—and "peace" is a fine translation. It gets you about halfway there. So peace means the absence of conflict in English. *Sh*—and *shalom* in Hebrew means the absence of conflict, but also the presence of a whole bunch of other things, namely unity, har—relational harmony, friendship, and that tight-knit communities resulting in safety and security and abundance and so on. That's *shalom*. He will be the prince of *shalom* because his reign will bring *shalom*. Verse seven: "Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David—"he'll be a descendant of David—"and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness." He's going to set all wrongs right. "From this time forth, forevermore, the zeal, the passion of the Lord of hosts will do this." Amen? Amen. It's like this big crescendo here at the end. It just picks up steam and so on. This is what's going to happen when Yahweh turns the lights back on. He allowed Israel to be—because of their unfaithfulness—covenant

unfaithfulness, their rebelliousness, they're allowing oppression and injustice—these are the people Yahweh saved out of Egypt. He gives them over into the consequences of their sins, but not forever. He will restore and bring a king. He'll turn the lights back on, and it will be an era of *shalom*, and it will bring peace and joy and freedom and so on. So powerful. To—to a people—again, you know, we laughed when we think about Canada invading and so on, but just imagine yourself in this set of circumstances. Isaiah—there's no reason for optimism in Isaiah's day. And he just boldly sets out this bright vision of—of hope. Of hope. It has nothing to do with their current circumstances. It has to do with Yahweh's promises to send a deliverer to bring blessing to all of the nations through the family of Abraham, through a descendant of the family of Abraham. That was God's promise. He's going to fulfill it. And that's a word of hope. It's a word of hope. Now here's where things get really interesting, I think. All right. So—uh—so we're a community of Jesus. And one of the core confessions of the first, you know—uh—followers of Jesus, right back to Jesus himself, was that the Old Testament prophets, the stories, are all pointing forward and meeting and finding their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth and then in what he accomplished in his life, and death, and resurrection, and so on. And so this passage, Isaiah chapter nine—it's a famous Christmas passage, especially verses six and seven—these meet their—their fulfillment in Jesus. That's our confession—right—as a—as a community of faith in Jesus. And—and the New Testament gospels actually make this very, very clear that this is the claim that Jesus brought these promises to their fulfillment. So just to be super clear—get us all on the same page here—this ha—this happens very clearly in Matthew chapter four. Just one of many examples, but you'll see why we look at it. So Matthew chapter four—just read with me. “When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, he left Judea—” which is down near Jerusalem—“and he first went to Nazareth and then he left there and moved to Capernaum, you know, beside the Sea of Galilee in the region of Zevulun and of Naphtali.” Hint, hint. Right? And y—and as a—as a—as a reader steeped in the Old Testament scriptures, you go, “Whoa, whoa, that's kind of crazy. What—” so and then he just comes right out and says it here. “This fulfilled what God said through the prophet Isaiah, ‘In the land of Zevulun and in the land of Naphtali’”—these are the words we just read here—“‘In the land of Zevulun and of Naphtali, beside the sea, beyond the Jordan River in Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And for those who lived in the land of deep darkness, a light has shined.’” And what is the light? When Yahweh turns the lights back on, what is it? What is it? Matthew says, “From then on, Jesus began to preach, ‘Turn from your sins, the Kingdom—the reign and rule of Heaven, of Israel's God, is near.’” It's arrived. It's here. So Matthew is super clear. He just connects the dots for you that, what Jesus returning to this very region that was taken out by Assyria in the past—this is a fulfillment of Isaiah's word that in the future, God would honor this same region again and use it as the staging ground for the—uh—for the bursting of hope and the coming of the king to—

to rescue his people. So some of us, we kind of look at that and we're like, "Wow, that's so cool how the Old Testament and New Testament come together and it unites," and so on. And that is—that is awesome. This is a really cool aspect of the Scriptures and how the New Testament authors—they tell the story of Jesus always as he's continuing the story of Yahweh and Israel together, and so on. But—uh—there are a number of features here that actually are kind of surprising and to me—uh—give us a deep insight into the nature of biblical hope. So let's just kind of ask first off here: How—uh—how long—how far in time is Jesus separated from Isaiah? This is real Bible trivia. I won't do that to any of you. Right?

[Laughter]

Tim: So we're talking about 700 years here. Is this a long time? Yes, this is quite a long time.

[Laughter]

Tim: This is a very long time. 700 years. Holy cow. So we read Isaiah nine and we're like, "Whoa, it's so crazy because he's talking about, like, current day events in his day, Isaiah's day, and then in the next breath, he's talking about this king to be born and so on." Like, "What—so how does all of this come together?" Again, welcome to reading the ancient—uh—Hebrew prophets. So—uh—maybe—I'll kind of draw a little drawing here that I think will illustrate what's happening—uh—here—here in Isaiah nine, but it happens all over the Hebrew—the Hebrew prophets. So let's—uh—let's say this is—uhm—Isaiah, right? And I'm sorry, I—I lost my really crisp black marker. Can you guys see there? Brown—is that okay? How about the balcony? How are you guys doing? Somebody give me a thu—okay. Thumbs up. All right. Thanks. So—uh—we've—let's say this is Isaiah here and of course he's Bible guy—right—so he always has to get a beard. He would also fit in in Portland, right?

[Laughter]

Tim: So there you go. All right. So let's say—uh—we have—uh—some hills in the foreground here. Let's say Isaiah's looking out at a grand, kind of, mountain scene here

and—uh—he can see hills in the foreground, but then in the back, you know, let's say—uh—he's looking at Mount Hood or something. Big Mount Hood. Little snowy cap there. Okay. So—uh—and maybe some of you have, like, seen a view similar to this looking at Mount Hood. Right? You see—you can go east of Portland, go to Sandy or something, and you get the—the valley going up to the mountain. And—uh—it's—it's very—obviously these are breathtaking views and so on. It's very grand kind of picture that you see. Now, can you tell—you can obviously tell these hills in the foreground, they're closer than the big mountain behind that, right? Yeah? Yes, we're on the same page there. But ho—precisely how far—when you have this vantage point from Sandy looking up to Mount Hood, how far exactly is this hill from that hill and that one from that one and that one from that one? It's actually very difficult, isn't it, when you're looking on a broad landscape there to—to discern the precise mileages between the different hills and so on? But you can definitely tell what's in front of you and what's behind that. And so this is kind of like what it—uh—what's happening when we're reading Isaiah chapter nine. Isaiah sees right in the foreground—this would be my little action comic pal here—so—uh—disaster—

[Tim makes a crashing sound]

Tim: Right, of—uh—of Assyria, right? Th—the empire of Assyria come and—and invades Israel. Disaster strikes in Isaiah's lifetime. But because of what Isaiah knows about his—God's promises to Abraham, God's promises to David, he knows that this cannot be the final word. And so he holds out this vision of—of hope—a very bold vision of hope of—uh—a coming Davidic king. So forgi—again, forgive my little silly cartoons—a coming king. And does the king come after the disaster? Answer—yes. How—precisely how far? Well, that's not the point of this poem. The point of this poem is not to tell you—give you a timeline or something like that. The point of the poem is to tell you something about God's character, that God's promises can be trusted. He's going to fulfill his promises to David, to Abraham, to redeem and to save, no matter what the present circumstances look like. There's no ground for optimism in the present, only hope in God's character and his promises. It's the first part of biblical hope. So—but we know that things aren't going to be this simple as they play out in history, right? And so let's say we were to turn—uh—this drawing sideways and get another vantage point at it. Let's say—uh—Isaiah is now looking this way. And so as we watch the events of history kind of play out the fulfillment—because we know there's 700—at least 700 years in between the two of these here—and so we can see there are certain events right here—right—on the foreground. There's certain events—the big mountains. Sorry,

my pen's not the—the best tonight. And so here's our—our snowy mountain. And so we can see, “Yes, immediately—pow—”

[Tim makes another crashing sound]

Tim: Right? And then way, way back here is the coming of the King. And yes, oh, we begin to catch a vision of—of how far separated these events are. 700 years. So this I think raises a question. And it's a question that I just really want us to—to stare at: the nature of biblical hope. Because hope is—yes, it's based in God's promises, but biblical hope is also about trusting in God's freedom and God's creativity for how exactly he's going to fulfill his promises. And the reality of the story of the people of Israel and the story of the people who are—who profess allegiance to this God is that this history is not easy for God's people. You read the book of Psalms, and it's full of people beating on God's chest, going, “How long? How long?” And they're not joking around. They're really serious because they're watching th—in their own days—whatever poets you read in the book of Psalms—they're watching evil erupt in their own day. And they're wondering: “Where is God? It's like the lights are turned out, and where is God? Where is he?” Is there reason to hope in moments like that? And—and the promises, God's promises, say yes. Biblical hope says yes. But we can't assume that—that the fact that God is going to be faithful to his promises means that I can then presume to tell God how he ought to fulfill them in his timeline and so on. This is the wrestling match of God's people throughout history. And—and the timeline is very difficult. Do you want to wait 700 years?

[Tim scoffs]

Tim: That's difficult for us to swallow. And that's okay. That's what the book of Psalms is for in the Bible—to legitimate the struggle and the tension of holding on to hope in God's promises when it looks like I have no reason for optimism in the present. And the timeline is just—we're just getting started here. Look at—uh—look—go back to Isaiah nine with me. Look at verses six and seven. And this is, I think, where it gets really, really profound. So Matthew just told us that Jesus coming into the region of Galilee, announcing the kingdom and so on—it was the beginning of the fulfillment of these promises. Look down at verses six and seven. Can you—can you think of how Jesus—did Jesus fulfill these promises in any kind of straightforward way? So a kingdom of



justice and peace forever and ever, justice and righteousness, the end of all war, and so on. It's okay to—to say yes—

[Laughter]

Tim: Or to say no—to say no, I guess, depending on your opinion. But—uh—so it does not seem like Jesus fulfilled these promises in any kind of straightforward way. What—what's going on here? What made Jesus so scandalous to his contemporaries was not that he—that he claimed to be the Messiah. It was that he claimed to be the Messiah, but the kinds of things that he was doing did not fit the expectation that people had. So Isaiah nine tells us that when this king is born that the—the yoke and the burden of the oppressor—that the power of the enemy, is going to be shattered. So—uh—did Jesus come and trounce on the enemy? What big bad enemy did people think Jesus was going to come trounce on if he said he was the Messiah? Who—right—Rome. That was the big bad empire in Jesus' day, right? And just the long history of empires over Israel in those 700 years from Assyria to Rome to Persia—right—to—to Greece, to—to—excuse me. Well, whatever—you get the point, right? It was a lot—

[Laughter]

Tim: It was a lot of empires. Right? It was a lot of—leading up to Rome in—in—in Jesus' day. It was just a—it's just a whole line of empires. And Jesus didn't set his target on anybody in Rome. But Jesus did very clearly set his target on an enemy that he claimed and believed he was doing battle with in those years he was going around Galilee announcing that Yahweh is becoming king again. And what enemy is that? So it's—it's the enemy that he told his followers to pray that we would not fall into the temptation of the lies of—of—of evil, this—this personal, s—mysterious, dark force—the New Testament calls this being by many different names—the—the Satan, the accuser in Hebrew. Right? The—the diabolical one. And you know—and so we kind of play this off or whatever. It's hard for us—for many of us, to kind of get this or whatever because we still have the image of somebody wearing red tights and holding a fork or something—

[Laughter]

Tim: Like that or whatever. What the Bible is trying to tell us is so profound about the nature of evil in our world, and it's not like, "Oh, the devil made me do it," or something. The—the fact that evil—the most consistent name that evil is given, this being is given in the scriptures, is the accuser or the liar. And it's this mysterious force at—at work in—among humanity lying to us about who we are, about who God is, about who other people are, and—and it's this—the random, senseless, tragic way that humans give in to the enemy and give in to those lies. And it—it results in these tragic eruptions of evil. And you guys, whatever the story is of what happened with these two young men in—in the last week or so, somewhere involved in that story is about those two young men believing deep lies about themselves and others, of—of giving in to those in a way that there's no hope. And a—they become vehicles of—of what the Bible calls evil. And we're naive to think that this is going to change just on its own—

[Laughter]

Tim: If humanity is left to its own devices. Because it just keeps happening, and it's so destructive and it's so random. And—and Jesus very clearly said that was his target. The powers of evil was his target. Because he believed that—that if you hit that enemy that is destroying being—human beings made in—in the image of God—if you can destroy that enemy and find a way to renew and restore the human heart and mind through God's power, through God's grace and—and new life—because then you've really begun to bring something worthy of being called salvation in the human story. And so Jesus goes around announcing—announcing the reign of the Kingdom of God and that he is bringing it to bear and that this is his enemy. And—and he includes tax collectors and prostitutes among this community of the forgiven, those among who Jesus' grace and forgiveness of them is—is defeating and conquering that evil and bringing new life inside of them. Right? This is what it's like to read the gospels. And—and did Jesus—did he—he clearly is announcing a Kingdom, and he has his target on an enemy. What about this whole stuff about the throne and so on? Was—was Jesus ever recognized as the king? So think—think of—look at verse—look at verse six. "The government will be upon his shoulders." Did Jesus ever take the government upon his shoulders? Right? You bet he did. Right? Yeah, you bet he did. He took a R—he took a Roman execution rack on his shoulders. And the—and the climactic point of every single one of the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—Jesus is recognized as a king. He gets a robe—right—he gets a crown, he gets a scepter, and he's exalted and he's lifted up. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I will be lifted up." It's the language of exaltation and enthronement on the cross. And so the—the—what each of the gospels is saying is this surprising, unexpected way that the God of Israel, the God of the

Scriptures, is fulfilling his promises. Not only is the timeline surprising to us, but the actual way that he is fulfilling the promises. This is how the Kingdom of God is coming. It's this upside-down—uh—value system of the Kingdom of God where God wins by giving up his life, right? He conquers by losing because his love is stronger than even the strongest weapon that the enemy of evil has in its hands, death. Let death do its worst on the Son of God. And—and this creator's love is more powerful than death. This is the surprising way that Jesus takes the throne of David. This is the—the surprising way that—that Jesus creates a pathway for *shalom* in people's lives. Who saw this coming? You know what I'm saying? And you can say, "Well, you could read a little further in the book of Isaiah," and you can go to chapter 53, "and you'd get this image of a —of a suffering servant figure whose death would bring life to others." But almost nobody in Jesus' day put together that the Messiah would have this vocation. Jesus was the one who put this together. He saw that this was how God was going to conquer evil. And this was a surprising way that God fulfilled his promises—the humble king, right? This is what we're going to sing about next week, the humble king. He wins by losing. I guarantee none of us would have thought of this plan. You know what I'm saying?

[Laughter]

Tim: So like, you know, like, "No-name guy born—podunk hill country town, he has like a band of fishermen and prostitutes, and he gets executed by the Romans. That's a plan." You know what I'm saying? Like, okay, here we go. Like what? How is—but—but that is the surprise—this is God's freedom and God's creativity to fulfill his promises. And—and Jesus will ultimately and finally set things right in justice and—and righteousness and bring in a kingdom of peace and *shalom*. But we don't have to—it's not like it hasn't begun yet. The claim of the gospels is that it has already begun right—right here. Okay. If this is true in the broad sweep of history, that biblical hope is about trusting God's promises, but also trusting in God's creativity and freedom to fulfill these promises in surprising, unpredictable ways to me, what does this mean for us? And how is this a word of God for us—right—as—as individuals or as a—as a community? So—so there might be—some of—I said this earlier here. Like, Christmas is actually not the cheeriest time. I'm kind of—

[Laughter]

Tim: I eventually got really tired of—of, like, being around churches during Christmas, and nobody ever acknowledged that Christmas is actually really difficult for a lot of people. Right? There are many—there are many of us who are—are not very cheery—

[Laughter]

Tim: Right—this time of year. There's lots of us who we—we feel—well, our lives feel like this, and we're precisely with the Israelites, wondering like, "Where is God again?" And like, it's almost like somebody turned out the lights. And it might be your life circumstances. It might—it might be—for some of us, this Christmas comes and this is going to be a Christmas where we are remembering loss in a—in a very deep and profound way, maybe for the first time this year. There might be some of us—we're not looking forward to being with our families and, you know, because it just reminds us of how screwed up we are—whatever, we revert into third-grade mode or something when we get around them. And—and it just—right—it makes us sad, and it's difficult. There's lots of us for whom that's true. There are others of us for whom we love it and—and we get to be around family, and it's just—we—we love every part of it. We're telling the story and eggnog and everything. And so that's great. Just accept that as a gift. Whether your circumstances are awesome, whether your circumstances are horrible, biblical hope can stand on its own two legs no matter what the circumstances are, because it's not optimism. And so there may be some of us—we're just—we're in this, like, valley shadowland, wondering, like, "Where is God? How is he going to fulfill his promises to me? Is he even in my—I can't hear him anymore." Like, "Where is God? Where is God?" Don't tell me you haven't been there. And I know there's a bunch of us who are here right now. It's just, I hear your stories throughout the week. And—and that's an important part of the journey as we follow this God. I mean, it's just—it's just built into—to the package as it were. That's why the book of Psalms is there in the Scriptures. Jesus was not thrilled in the garden of Gethsemane about what was about to happen. He actually said he wished—"I don't want this to happen. I don't want it. I don't want—"and there's a lot of—a lot of us who are right there. But see, here's the paradox of how God fulfills his promises. This is precisely in those dark moments where we feel like God has turned out the lights. And yes, it's great to trust in God's promises or whatever. What does that mean for me right now? The power of the God—the power of this way of God becoming king and—and of initiating the Kingdom, is that this is where God meets us in the valley—the cross is Jesus going to the valley with us. Right? The cross is Jesus experiencing the absence of God's presence and wondering where—where is God? It's God crucified. It's God being God-forsaken. That's the paradox of the cross. And this is the—the core of biblical hope. It's God's working out his salvation

in our lives in a way that—that might surprise us. We wouldn't have anticipated. Many of us would not prefer that it happened this way. But the promise of the Gospel is that in the cross, Jesus meets us in the dark valleys where we're waiting for God to turn the lights back on. And he will. He will. That's his promise. But it may take place in a time and in a way that—that we cannot predict. How many of us need to hear that word of hope? That's precisely the kind of hope offered us in Isaiah nine. So as we go—uh—into our time of worship tonight and we come to the—the bread and the cup—I mean the bread and the cup is such—is such a perfect way to think about what the birth of the humble king is—is leading towards. It's because this is the moment where—where God fulfills his promises to us in a profound but surprising way. And so there might be—uh—some of us who, we need to come to the table and take the bread and the cup to remind ourselves of the cross and to ask Jesus to make himself real to us as we're in the valley, as we're in the dark—in the dark shadowlands. And there might be some of us who just need to celebrate in the gift of grace and of life tonight as we come to the bread and the cup. I'm not sure. But—uh—this is the vision of hope that's offered us in the—in the Scriptures—God's promises, his creativity, and his freedom to work out his salvation in our lives in ways that we cannot predict.

[Musical Break (53:18—53:25)]

Tim: You guys, thank you for listening to Exploring My Strange Bible podcast. We're going to explore new awesome things in the Scriptures together in future episodes. So we'll see you next time.