

Branch

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Preacher: James Ross

[0:00] This is God's Word. So, this is the season, isn't it, Christmas season for many things, including, I was thinking about this because of our passage, the season for chopping down! of many, many trees. I don't know if anybody in their minds or knows the trivia, how many Christmas trees are chopped down in the UK every year? We had a wee test in our family. The answer was between six and eight million trees every year chopped down. And of course, for those chopped trees, they represent fun, they represent joy. Nobody minds when those trees are cut down. But for those of us who are from the UK or have you been around for a couple of years, do you remember when the sycamore gap tree got cut down? Back in 2023, I think it was. So, there was this 150-year-old sycamore tree in the middle of Hadrian's wall, this iconic tree. And during the night, one night, a couple of guys came and hacked it to the ground. And those culprits, they were charged. It was seen as a crime.

And for a time, it was as if they became public enemy number one. In that moment, the chopping down of this tree was absolutely not a good thing. And that kind of fits with our imagery of cutting down.

Typically, I suppose it's negative. If somebody is cut down in the prime of life, we understand that some sudden disaster has come on them. Or if we find ourselves being cut down to size, we've had a pride problem and something has humbled us. So, often, chopping represents a judgment and it's a negative. But to go back to our sycamore gap tree for a moment, it made the news not once but twice.

So, about a year later, in August 2024, the announcement came that from the stump, there were some branches that were sprouting. And this is causing great excitement and hope. And so, now there's great care to protect the stump so that in the fullness of time, another tree, a different kind of looking tree will emerge. So, there's judgment, but there's also hope. In the title for Jesus, the branch, Jesus, the righteous branch, there are both of those themes also in the story of Israel and Judah and in our lives. So, we need to think about what's going on when we read Isaiah chapter 11, and why does this promise have anything to do with us? So, let's get into our text and let's look at this promise that we find here in verse 1, a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a branch will bear fruit. So, we've been thinking about, for the last few weeks, a king, a wicked king called Ahaz the king of Israel, a king of Israel, a king of Israel, a king of Israel, a king of Israel. And he's received a number of messages, a number of messages also for the nation. And here is the last of them. And it's a message that says that beyond the disaster of their bad choices, beyond the foolishness of their human alliances, beyond the sin of turning their back on God, God is going to show his faithfulness to his people. In this story of salvation, God's grace will get the last word, that while there has been judgment, there has been a cutting down, renewal will come, life will come. And that's the image.

[3:41] There is a tree that's been chopped down, but from which this branch will sprout, and there will be life. It's an image that's already been used by Isaiah. In chapter 6 and verse 13, it's there for the judgment of God's people. And then at the end of chapter 10, verse 34, it's a judgment image to do with his enemies. He will cut down the forest thickets with an axe. Lebanon will fall before the mighty one.

And so, there is the idea that God has come, and he's brought a decisive judgment. But after that fact, in the future, a Messiah king will emerge. And he will come from a particular family, the family

of Jesse. Now, Jesse was the father of the great king, David. And so, here is a promise from God of a new beginning, not affected by all the past failures of past failed kings. This king is going to be different. Verse 2 tells us he's a spirit-filled king. And so, the promise that God had made at the time of Samuel to David, that there would be a righteous king who would rule and reign forever, that promise is going to be kept. And now he is known as this righteous branch.

We talk about family trees, don't we? And maybe if we're interested in genealogies, we've maybe sketched out our family tree. I vividly remember one of my lecturers at university, when I was doing information studies, for one class, took a bit of paper, probably about this size. So, about six or eight feet by four feet. And he spent two hours mapping out hundreds of years of his family tree, all the different branches, who was married to whom, what children they had.

And as he was doing that, he was telling us stories. He would tell us stories about people who were regarded, you know, the black sheep of the family, people that, you know, kind of brought the name into disgrace. But there were also some high points, some great shining lights. But we're familiar with that image of the family tree. Now, if we were to look at the Bible, and to think about the family tree of the kings, if we were to look at the list of the kings, we would acknowledge that, yes, there is some light, there is some good, David and Solomon in particular. But there are also many black sheep. There were many failures, some desperate failures, including King Ahaz. None of the kings up until this point were ever going to fulfill this promise of one who would rule in righteousness. And so, all the hope of the people of God rests on a coming king. The people in Isaiah's day, they're like the chopped down stump. The king has failed to be faithful. The axe of God's judgment has fallen. There has been idolatry. There has been injustice. They have done shameful things in the eyes of God. They have attempted to save themselves. And His people have been cut down in judgment.

[6:59] But wonderfully, as this promise reminds us, all of that is no barrier to God's saving plan. And the proof of that is the branch.

Now, I wonder, as we reflect on our lives today, do we see ourselves somewhat in that story? Do we see ourselves as, yes, we have some light, but we also know that are seasons of darkness, and that we have not lived that righteous life?

And if we do, do you see why the branch offers to us hope? Because here we have God saying to us, in the giving of His Son, the Lord Jesus, to be this perfectly righteous king, God is saying, I am absolutely committed to my plan of redemption.

I am committed to save people, not because they deserve it, but because I love to be merciful and gracious. So there is hope for us. When we like Ahaz and like the people in Judah, when we love other things rather than the one true God, when we live for other things rather than the one true God, when we fail to love our neighbor and put them first, there is still hope for us.

When we have that sense of the sting and the shame of our sin and our failure, when we have perhaps tried to save ourselves by our own good works, but we recognize in ourselves and perhaps in God's Word that we fail to hit the pass mark of God's perfect righteousness, there is hope for us, not in ourselves, but in this righteous branch.

[8:48] That in God's gift of His Son, the one who would be born of the Virgin Mary, there truly is good news of great joy for us, because in the promised King, there is the promise of salvation from sin, there is the promise of restoration to life with God, there is the reality that your failures and mine are not greater than God's grace. That's the promise that we find in the righteous branch.

Well, having mentioned that, let's move secondly to think about the person that this promise focuses us on. In your life, is there anyone that you can trust? When we look around in our society, perhaps when we look around at government, do we find ourselves asking, is there someone someone that we can trust? It's really important to ask that question when we come to this promise, because this promise centers on a particular person, and it centers on the God of the promise.

So this promise holds true, only if the person holds good and true. This promise is only good news, if we place our faith in the one who makes the promise, and if we stake our life on the promise, and the person attached to it. As C.S. Lewis once said, you never know how much you really believe anything until it's truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. This promise is a life and death promise. Just to move from the promise to move, we have a new house, and in our new house, just off the kitchen, we have a pulley for hanging up our washing. And the pulley system is held up by a climbing rope. You know those ones, thick cord, colorful. Now, it's an easy thing to say

in our house, I trust that rope when all it's doing is holding up some bedding. How would I show that I have real faith in that climbing rope? Perhaps it would be if I was to take it off the pulley, if I was to take it to the climbing center, to attach it to the top of the wall, and then hang from it. You only show how much you trust a thing when it becomes a matter of life and death to us. God is giving us a promise in a person. And he says, in this promise and in this person, there is the reality of a renewed life.

I'll say it in verse 1. In verse 4, there is the promise of true justice that you and I long for. In verses 6 to 9, there is the promise of a new world marked by total peace.

And if we are to enjoy these things, then we must understand who the person of the promise is, and then to ask ourselves, will I trust him in my life and with my day?

[12:32] Is there anyone we can trust becomes a really important question for us to ask, because whether it's watching the news, whether it's considering the world of politics, or whether at a personal level we face disappointments, whether we know what it is to have broken promises or betrayals or at a time of need our friends let us down, it can be really easy to be cynical and we can take that cynicism to the Bible and say, well, I find it really hard to trust anybody else, so why would I trust God and trust his word? How can we trust this king? What makes this king different? It's a really crucial question, and Isaiah wants to show us the personal qualities of the branch, and as he does so, ask yourself, what qualities about this king offer me hope? First, we're told that this promised one is filled with the spirit of the Lord. He is the spirit-filled king. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might, the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

In the Old Testament, when someone was filled with the spirit, it signaled that this person was operating by a very different system to everybody else, not relying on sort of human wisdom, human ability. God was giving that person power and ability, so whether they were building a tabernacle or whether they were speaking for God, if you're filled with the spirit, you're operating from a different system, and you do so because you've got a different level of knowing God, and so when we hear about this one who's filled with the spirit of the Lord, we understand that this king that's being spoken of, he will know God personally. This king who delights in the fear of the Lord, he's going to live for not his own glory, but for the glory of the Lord.

That in this king, his wisdom, his power, his teaching, his worship, they'll both be from God and for God. That's very different to Ahaz. Ahaz was desperate to keep hold of his throne. He was going to do things his way and not God's way, and so the promise of a spirit-filled king is good news. And Isaiah says, if we follow, if we submit to the spirit-filled king, then we will know life in his kingdom. And in that kingdom, there is renewal, and there is restoration, and there is justice, and there is peace, and there is joy. And not only is this king spirit-filled, this king is also known for his righteousness and faithfulness. See there in verse 5, righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sass around his waist. In the original, this is actually a description of the king's underclothing, his underwear. If you strip everything away from this king, what is essential to his character is he is righteous and he is faithful.

Now, thinking about that, that picture of here's the king's underclothing showing his essential qualities, how different that often is to ourselves. You know, we can often try and wear a mask of decency. We know how to perform so that perhaps people will think that we are faithful or we are righteous. Now, we have learned to play that part often, but when we dig down and when we are tested, perhaps we find that we're not truly righteous and faithful. But this king is, and he always is.

[16:25] And when you have a king like this, you have a society and a world that we all want. So look at verse 3. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears, but with righteousness he will judge the needy. He's not going to favor the powerful.

He's not going to show favoritism to those who might benefit him. There is no bias with this righteous king. He will simply do what is right all the time. And this is good news for those who are

often overlooked, because there is the promise that they will find true justice.

So imagine a leader today absolutely free of racism, not in the pocket of big business, utterly committed to seeking the welfare of the marginalized and the forgotten. Then we're beginning to get a glimpse of the kind of leader and the kind of society that would be good for us all.

And more than that, to go on in verse 4, he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Here is one who will righteously judge all the wicked. Here is one who doesn't sweep evil under the rug, who doesn't say, well, evil and wickedness, it doesn't really matter. This is a God and a king who cares enough to act for justice in the end. And again, doesn't that fit with what we long for? If we've ever found ourselves or family members the victim of a crime, or when we hear of terrible things in the news, or as we consider the terrible dictators of history, we think it'd be a terrible idea if God just said, well, that doesn't matter. A king who didn't care about suffering and evil and wrongdoing, that would not be a king we could trust. We couldn't say he was righteous and faithful.

That wouldn't be a God we could trust. And so what we're discovering here is that God's commitment to his plan of redemption, to keep his promise, it involves sending a perfect, spirit-filled, righteous and faithful king.

[18:39] And what you and I need to know is that this king is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And that's why it's headlined and highlighted for us in the New Testament. Maybe we think of, especially about the Gospel of Luke. He's conceived by the Holy Spirit. He is filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism. He speaks and he acts as he is led by the Spirit. We look at his life and we hear him saying that he considers doing his Father's will his delight. The things that he does are what the Father does. We see him facing the cross saying, not my will, but yours be done.

And we begin to understand he is the righteous king. He lived in the world like us. He faced temptations like us. But unlike us, he never sinned.

And to read the Gospels and to look at his ministry, we see here is one who is concerned for righteousness, for the weak and the needy and the despised and the forgotten and the rejected. And where do we see that especially? We see at the cross. Because we are the weak and the poor and the needy and he dies for us. And there on the cross, Jesus satisfies the demands of God's justice as he keeps the law in his life and he dies because the law has been broken. And he does that not because he has broken the law, but because we have. So that poor, needy sinners like us, we could find mercy.

And so God gives us this promise and he gives us the person of his son, Jesus, and he says to us, will you trust this king? Will you cling on to this rope, confident that if your faith is in Jesus, you have security both in this life and even when we face death? Faith rests in knowing the character, the goodness, the faithfulness of King Jesus.

[20:52] Now let's turn from thinking about the person to think some more about what this person brings. Let's think finally about the peace that he has come to bring in verses 6 to 9.

I'm going to go out on a limb for a moment and I'm going to imagine that Christmas for many of us is even more busy than life normally is. That for many of us it's even more stressful than the rest of the year. There are more events in the calendar. There is more shopping to do and wrapping to do. There's food to buy and food to prepare. There are family gatherings. There are parties. There is so much activity and that can bring stress. And on top of that there are the felt losses.

We find ourselves wanting peace. We come to the Christmas season and we hear about peace. But peace can seem so far from our life and from our hearts.

And the question might become, well if Jesus is the King who brings peace, why don't I feel more of it? Why don't I see more of it in my life or in this world? Why is there so much chaos and disorder? This week I was reading about the situation right now for Christians in Sudan. They are fiercely persecuted. Hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes.

[22:17] Their churches are being burned. They're facing arrest. Where is peace? Back the story of our lives. Sometimes it's stress to do with finances. Sometimes it stresses in our family.

Sometimes it's work and education that causes anxiety. Sometimes it's illness. Sometimes it's pressure. They all press up on us. And we're desperate for peace and we're not sure where it is to

be found.

Where is peace to be found? It's to be found in the King. In the promise of the King and the Kingdom He is bringing in. And God loves to capture our imagination and in sometimes our darkness and confusion to give us the light and promise.

And so there's a striking picture here in verses 6 to 9 of the world returned to the way God made it to be. Of a renewed world we can hardly wrap our heads around.

Because here is the picture of a world with total peace and security. How does Isaiah get us there? Look at verse 6. The wolf will live with the lamb.

[23:27] Verse 7. The cow will feed with the bear. Their young will lie down together. The lion will eat straw like the ox. Again, for those of us who live in the UK, I imagine at some point we've watched David Attenborough documentaries.

And we know how they typically go. But imagine a David Attenborough documentary of the created world in any context where there's no more hunting.

But all the animals live in perfect harmony. Where you don't get the orchestra moving to the really dark, edgy, tense music because we know a hunt is about to begin.

All is innocence. There is no threat. All is peace. That's the image that Isaiah is given to convey to us the kingdom, this righteous branch is going to establish.

One where peace is absolute and unbreakable. One where there is total security. One in which, as we're told in verse 8, the infant will play near the cobra's den.

[24:33] And the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. That's a brilliant little verse. Because it takes us back to the beginning of the Bible.

And it takes us back to the beginning of the gospel story. We ask ourselves, what's the problem with our world? And why don't we have peace?

I think the best way that we can answer it as Christians is by telling ourselves the gospel story. This is God's answer. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And he created Adam and Eve in his image to live in a perfect garden, in perfect peace with God and with one another. They were given one command in that garden with a promise of perfect eternal life if they obeyed, but death if they disobeyed.

Adam and Eve didn't obey. They ate the forbidden fruit. And in that moment, sin came. Death came. Separation came.

[25:40] And peace was lost. And all the brokenness in our world and in our lives, it flows from that first act of rebellion.

Because from our first parents, Adam and Eve, we have all inherited a sin nature. And from that sin nature flow sinful thoughts and words and actions.

A few moments ago, we spoke about our longing for justice that we have in our hearts. The truth, as the Bible puts it, is that because of our sin, because of our rebellion, if we were to get justice from God, we would die and face eternal separation and condemnation.

We are hopeless and helpless facing the wages of sin, which is death, because there is no one righteous, not even one. In the good and true story of Christianity, there is a tension, there is a problem, and it's a problem that we have created.

There is a rescue that needs to be effected, and it comes through the God of grace providing the answer and the Savior. In the good and true story of the Bible, we have a God who is gracious and good.

[26:55] And way back in the garden, when Adam and Eve fell into sin, He promised one would come who would crush the head of the snake, who would undo the curse of sin that leads to death, who would bring us back into life, bring us back into peace with God.

And so Jesus came, the righteous branch came, the Son of God came, born of the Virgin Mary. So without that sin nature, we all have, so He is free from the stain of sin.

And Jesus came, and He lived a perfect life of true obedience. Fully God and fully man, He kept the law on our behalf. And then Jesus, the one who knew no sin, became sin for us, so that we might become in Him the righteousness of God, as He faced death as our perfect substitute.

He came as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and He made peace for us by His blood shed on the cross. And by God's grace, in the death and resurrection victory of Jesus, a great transfer takes place.

Our record of sin and debt is transferred to Jesus, and He bears the penalty in full, and Jesus' perfect record of righteousness is transferred to us. The Lord Jesus died and then rose for our justification, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

[28:14] And by faith in this, Jesus, we have a new identity. We become a child of God. We have a new status. We have peace with God, since He's reconciled us to God. And we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts to empower us to live a life of obedience for Jesus, our King.

And the answer to the question, why don't we always see this peace? Why don't we always feel this peace in our lives? Why is there more chaos than secure peace, even as Christians?

It's because we're still in the Advent season. Jesus has come once, but we're waiting for Him to come again. Look at verse 9. We have this promise. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. We are waiting for Christ's return, and when Christ returns, the glory of the Lord will fill the earth. The knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth, and then we will have true peace.

Now we do, as Christians, we know we have peace of conscience. We have the wonderful peace of sins forgiven. We have the wonderful peace of knowing God is with us and for us, but our peace is not complete.

[29:23] Jesus' peace in Jesus' kingdom is not complete yet. But that perfect peace will be ours when Christ comes back. To finally and fully defeat Satan's sin and death, to fully, finally establish His kingdom of peace on the earth.

And if we place our faith in Him, we will live in His kingdom of peace forever. That's the gospel we believe. That's the message that we need this Christmas.

And this, this is the righteous branch we must place our trust in, who will complete the promise, who will establish His kingdom of peace in our hearts and in the fullness of time in this world.