

The predicted saviour

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[0 : 00] We're going to think a little bit about a particular prophecy, so I'd invite you to, if you've got a Bible that you can share across or open up and look into, to turn to Isaiah chapter 11.

And I'd like us to look at one of the prophecies. I'll explain why in a moment.

But here in Isaiah, we are reading an ancient prophecy, which I think Matthew referred to in the story that we read. This is Isaiah 11, 1-9.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a branch will bear fruit.

In case I forget to tell you, the Hebrew word for branch is nezer. You might see the relevance of that in a minute. From his roots a branch will bear fruit.

[1 : 06] The spirit of the Lord will rest on him. The spirit of wisdom and of understanding.

The spirit of counsel and of power. The spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

And he will delight. Interesting word being used there. It might mean to sniff or scent. He will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears. But with righteousness, but with righteousness, he will judge the needy.

With justice, uprightness, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.

[2 : 10] With the breath of his lips, he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt, or the sash round his hips.

And faithfulness, the sash round his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb. The leopard will lie down with the goat.

The calf and the lion and the yearling together. And a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear.

Their young will lie down together. And the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra.

And the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.

[3 : 13] For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That's the prophecy I'd like us to look at.

Let's say a prayer. Lord, we've come together this morning from different walks of life and different experiences. And here we are listening to what the Bible says.

Please help truth to be spoken. And help what is true to be received as true. And we don't want to try and adjust reality to suit us.

We want our lives to be adjusted to suit what is real. And let you, Lord, be the judge of that as you see us and hear us and see our hearts this morning.

Help me to speak truth this morning in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Well, we read Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus.

[4 : 21] And, you know, once you get into reading these accounts, it's very difficult to sort of reduce it just to a Christmas card, isn't it? There's so much more going on. And the Jesus of the Bible just stubbornly refuses to be restricted to just being a baby and just being surrounded by donkeys and wise men and shepherds.

And the whole thing just presses to be bigger than that. Christmas is the celebration of a birthday. I think we'd all agree on that.

It's the birth of Jesus. We don't know whether Jesus was born at this time of year. There's various reasons why this anniversary is celebrated at this time of year. But here we are.

Jesus' birth is a historical fact. I don't think we could argue with that. But once we get into just beyond the fact of his being born, we get drawn into a tapestry and a mesh of meanings and significance.

And it's expressed, you might have noticed, we'll look back in a moment in Matthew's Gospel, a tapestry of interwoven prophecies.

[5 : 36] This is the fulfillment of that. Let me just remind you. I don't know whether you noticed when Julia read, but quite a large number of times it was said, All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.

The wise men inquired, you remember, in Jerusalem, and they looked back in the Bible to see what prophecies were being fulfilled. And it was fulfilled what the prophet Jeremiah had said, a voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children.

And right at the very end, when Jesus ended up living in Nazareth, so was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, plural, he will be called a Nazarene.

So, all these interwoven prophecies. Now, you think of prophecies, the world's full of prophecies and prophets and history's full of them. I just looked up a few of them on Wikipedia and then I got confused.

Nostradamus was a prophet, I think, and there's the Delphic Oracle. Some prophecies are just misleading.

[6 : 46] Do you remember Macbeth? Anybody here remember the Shakespeare play Macbeth? Macbeth, it starts off with a prophecy, I think, doesn't it? And then the whole story is how this unwinds and Macbeth does his best to avoid it and ends up being doomed by it.

Not a very cheery prophecy. But I do want to say that you can't really have any sort of serious engagement with the Christmas story unless you're prepared to take on board that the storyteller is telling us that there is this and this and this and this and this prophecy all being fulfilled, not for doom like Macbeth, but for positive reasons.

And I'd like us to look at one particular prophecy this morning and I'd like to try and persuade you. There's an immense positiveness. Christmas is a time when it's sort of almost compulsory to be cheerful.

That's a bit difficult sometimes. But what I want to say is that in this story, rightly understood, there are some genuine reasons to be cheerful. There are some positive, very, very positive things going on here.

So let's look in detail at one prophecy about the child and see the positive points that help us to celebrate. So if you've got a Bible and you're happy to look across at that, Isaiah 11 is the bit that we're going to look at.

[8 : 08] So let me say four things about this prophecy which I think are extremely positive. So the first one is to say something about his special human family.

So Isaiah chapter 11 says, A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse. From his roots a branch will bear fruit.

From his roots a branch will bear fruit. And I said that the word for branch is nezer. That's in Hebrew. And when Matthew writes later on, He will be called a Nazarene.

And I think he's making a sort of play on words and saying, Look, they're in the Bible. He lives in branch town. Because of Nazareth, Nazarene.

And there's a prophecy of a branch. See, there's a connection there. Lots of other connections as well. But I think he's sort of giving us the clue that this prophecy is very definitely tied to Jesus.

[9 : 10] And this bit is talking about his special human family. Now you're thinking, what's this about Jesse? The stump of Jesse. What on earth is this about? If you look back into the history of it, Jesse was the Jewish royal family.

Jesse was the father of David. And we all know about King David. As in once in royal David's city. So very important family. And in this part of history, the nation and the kingdom had been chopped down.

And was in a low state. That's what it's thinking. So if you imagine the family tree of the royal family tree of David being chopped.

And just leaving a stump. And the prophecy says the stump isn't going to die off. There's going to be a little shoot coming out of it.

So shoot root. I'm not sure that Hebrew horticulture was as precise as ours. I think it just says something's going to spring from this stump. So this is telling us about the particular family that this person is going to be born in.

[10:26] And you will know in the story that the family line of Jesus is particularly important, isn't it? He will sit on the throne of his father David, the angels say.

Or he goes to royal David's city to be born. So it's a very key thing here. The prophecy says about his special human family.

Now it's a royal family. This is going to be a royal baby. Now I think we have sort of conflicting thoughts about royalty and monarchy in our western culture.

So one thought says, you know, forget royalty. They're privileged and blah. Really anybody and everybody can be whatever you want to be.

It's particularly expressed in the American dream, isn't it? Anybody can be president. You don't have to be royalty. You just, anybody from any family can be anything you want to be.

[11:28] And anything of that would be unfair. That's part of, we've got a little bit of that in European culture, haven't you? Be anything you want to be. On the other hand, there's a sort of love affair with royalty, isn't there?

So did you watch the royal wedding? It was a royal wedding, wasn't it? Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. I confess I did. I was on the lookout for all Meghan Markle's co-stars in suits.

But we sort of have a love affair about that. And when Meghan became pregnant, it's all over the papers, isn't it? Royal baby expected. And so that aspect of a dream, the royal family, think of their history.

Do you know what your great-great-grandfather did? Well, Prince Harry jolly well does because it's part of British history. And the thing, when you're born into that family, the things you possess. When you're born into that family, the things that are expected of you, you can't opt out of. The things you inherit. I mean, it's just a thing. That's what it is to be in the royal family.

[12:37] And this prophecy says that this baby that's coming is going to be like that. And one thing this is saying is, whatever else you might be able to be, if you work hard enough and study hard enough, etc., you will never be the saviour of the world.

You'll never be that. Because God has chosen one particular nation, one particular family, one particular person to be the saviour of the world.

And you might say, well, that's a bit unfair. Why can't we all have a go? But there's something quite profoundly true about this. It says, when it comes to being the saviour of the world, if it was left to each one of us, it would be a total failure.

Because it's not in the capacity of each of us to save the world, nor even to save ourselves. This is saying that you have to relate to this one particular family and this one particular person, this one particular king.

And you say, well, this is very unfair. God sets salvation up in a very unfair way. But I say again, if it was down to each one of us to save ourselves individually, I think it would be a desperate situation.

[14:11] But God says, look, I've sorted this. I've got one person. I've been preparing all the inheritance and the expectations and the tasks and the mission of one particular family with a view to one particular king.

Let him do it for you. Let him be the saviour. Now, I know you have to humble yourself. You have to say, well, that's something I can't do. No, you can't do it. He'll have to do it for you.

That's what the word grace means. Grace is a Christian word. And it means that God saves people who can't save themselves.

Okay, there's number one, a prophecy about the special royal family. Second thing in this prophecy about his divine equipping. So I'm reading what, just telling you what it says here.

It says the spirit of the Lord will rest on him. The spirit of wisdom and understanding. The spirit of counsel and of power.

[15:19] The spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. And he will delight in the fear of the Lord. And I am not a Hebrew expert.

I looked it up in some books. And as far as I could understand it, even the word delight in verse 3, where it says scent, or could mean scent or sniff, is actually the word spirit again.

Perhaps it's in a different context. But there's a lot about spirit there, isn't it? It's repeated multiple times. And which spirit or whose spirit is this person said to have?

And the answer is the Lord. He has the spirit of the Lord, meaning the Lord God. Now, I've only picked one little prophecy for this morning.

And you'll understand in the nature of it. There's a whole web of prophecies that all say slightly different things and combine together to give a rich picture. So, there's more that can be said about the spirit of the Lord and there's more that can be said about this person prophesied.

[16:34] But this bit says he is definitely equipped from God. And he is equipped with God because the spirit of the Lord, as we learn as the Bible unfolds its story to us, is the Lord himself.

So, he is equipped from God and he is equipped with God. So, he's very human. But there's also a very powerfully divine aspect to this person prophesied.

And what sort of effect does the spirit have or how is the spirit characterized? Well, I think we would have to say that the spirit here is in the realm of insight and attitude.

So, it's the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, meaning to advise, to give wisdom. And it says power.

So, we've got one word for power there. But lots of words for understanding. And then spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. So, I think we've got a lot about insight. He understands.

[17:50] He sees. He knows what's what. He sees things as they really are. And something about attitude. And the attitude is the fear of the Lord.

And that's mentioned twice. So, here's somebody who, in whom is sort of embedded a deep, what should I say, a seriousness about God.

A deep respect for God. So, that's the sort of air that he breathes. Fear of the Lord doesn't mean, oh dear, dear, dear, sort of cowering fear. But it means a deep and healthy and wholesome sort of worshipping respect for God.

Sort of almost entirely absent in our culture, isn't it? But I would say, here's something positive.

Because I would like, wouldn't you like to ask about the truth of the universe?

Wouldn't you like to know what we're here for? Wouldn't you like to know the deep things? Wouldn't you want to know that? Well, he is the person to ask.

[18:56] Because he is filled with the spirit of knowledge, counsel, understanding. And if I said, how am I supposed to live in a world like this?

How do I relate to the maker of it? He's going to tell me. He says, well, the way I do it is I have a fear of the Lord. I realize that God is present in every situation, in every decision, in every perception of the world.

And this person would say, that's the air I breathe is the fear of the Lord. I think there's something very positive about this person. He would be a great person to know, a great person to be in touch with.

Number three. The prophecy talks about his character. Now, end of verse three, I never got to the bottom of this in my research this week.

I couldn't work out, 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. So does that mean that he doesn't just judge on surface perceptions?

[20:08] I think that's probably what it means. But he gets to the heart of the matter. I think that's what it means. But it talks about righteousness, verse four. With righteousness he will judge the needy.

With justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. We'll come back to those verses in a minute. But I was interested in verse five, where it says, righteousness will be his belt.

I did look that up in Hebrew. It says the sash of his, there's different words for this part of your body. So if you were to say the sash of your hips, and then the next says, and faithfulness the sash of your waist.

It's a bit difficult to translate it, but it's sort of what goes around here, the sash. But the emphasis is not on the clothing aspect of it, but faithfulness and righteousness.

Now then, my wife and I have been doing some painting and decorating. Some of you know this.

We've been doing this since September because we're just slow workers.

[21:17] And do you know the temptation? I don't know whether you've ever been tempted to do this. You see, oh, that just needs, just pop up and see how the room's getting on. And that little bit of painting there, just there's a gap there.

The temptation, dressed in my Sunday clothes, just to pick up a paintbrush and just have a little dab at that. Have you ever had that temptation?

You don't, you just, and then you, you know, I've just speckled myself with white paint. Ah, so, and then cleaning it, I've got it on my fingers.

And now I've got it on my shirt. Have you ever done that? You're completely ill-equipped for the job that you're doing. It just shows what an amateur you are if you do that, doesn't it?

Because you haven't really come equipped to do painting. It's just sort of something you've picked up when you're really intending to do something else. If you were a professional, you would wear the proper clothes, wouldn't you?

[22 : 17] Wouldn't you? I think professionals have a proper, they have overalls and the correct boots and the correct gloves and a mask and protective eyewear because that's what they do.

That's what they're about. They know what they're doing. They're dressed for it. And I think that's what this idea of God having, or this person having righteousness as his belt and faithfulness as his sash says, you know, he's dressed for that because that's what he does.

He's dressed for that because that's what he's, he's not doing righteousness and faithfulness as a sort of something he's just picked up while he was in the middle of doing something else.

That's what he does. That's what he does. He's a professional. Righteousness and faithfulness.

These, I think, are very positive things. Righteousness is what is right and fair and good and worthy and noble.

And if you were in business, you would like to do business with righteous people, wouldn't you?

People who charge you an honest amount for an honest job.

[23 : 31] People who pay their bills on time. People who don't put on the spec something that isn't going to happen. Righteousness is a very wholesome thing to have. And this guy is a professional at righteousness.

And faithfulness is another beautiful word. It means to be trustworthy, to keep his word, to be dependable, somebody you can rely on, somebody you can count on.

And I think this is a highly desirable characteristic, isn't it? Isn't that what we would love to have in relationships, that people are faithful, they promise you something, they'll keep it.

If they tell you something, you know, you can depend on it. If they say they'll turn up, they'll turn up.

All these things are highly desirable.

I mean, in relationships, in a marriage relationship, you promise to love somebody. Which is about the most delightful and precious thing you can ever say to another person.

[24 : 37] And to be faithful in that and to keep that promise is just a highly desirable thing, I think. And this person is, if you like, a professional at that.

That's what he does. I think this is extremely positive, don't you? I would love to have somebody like that in my life. You know, the more people I have like that in my life, the better.

And if there's somebody who is the absolute expert at it, well, what could be better than to have that person in your life? And it's going to say that this person isn't just relating to individuals, but relating to the whole world.

And I would love to have somebody like that ruling the world, wouldn't you? Would you not prefer to have somebody like that ruling the world than, whatever you may think of Mrs. May, she has her limitations, but this person is ultimately righteous and faithful.

Whatever you may think of Donald Trump, he has his limitations. Wouldn't you prefer somebody who is an absolute expert in righteousness and faithfulness ruling the world? Anyway, that was number three, his character.

[25 : 42] Number four, the prophecy about his specific mission. Now, he has a mission. And let me just go back over what was already quoted.

There are two groups of people and one thing in mind for the mission. So let's just look at the two groups of people, first of all. In verse four, it says, so this is his mission, to judge the needy.

Verse four, and then with justice, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. So we've got a group of people there described as poor.

What have we got? Needy? Poor. You could translate it as meek or in a situation of vulnerability.

These are people who are, you know, in that weak, needy condition.

We'll come back to that in a moment. The other group of people that are mentioned are, end of verse four, with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Okay, so one group of people he will

be for, and the other group of people, the wicked, he's going to slay the wicked.

[26 : 57] I think I've got ahead of myself. So the actions on these two groups, it says, I'll just quote you what it says, with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

You see what I mean that the Christmas story, it takes you into other territory, doesn't it? We've now got well beyond a baby in a manger.

We've got to a powerful force for good embodied in a person who will slay the wicked.

That's what it says, he will slay the wicked with the breath of his lips. This is saying that his spoken words have this powerful effect.

You know, if he says to the wicked person, you're dead, there's no court of appeal that the wicked person will say, oh, excuse me, I need to, no, you can't tell me that. I'm going to appeal to the court of human rights for this.

[28 : 00] It just doesn't work. He says, you're dead, he slays the wicked. And Jesus, of course, spoke of himself in this way.

He says that at some point he will say, depart from me, you workers of iniquity. And there's no appeal. And what I would say, who here in this room would want to hear that from him?

Surely not. Surely not. You wouldn't want him to say that to you, would he? I mean, he's going to say it to somebody, but you wouldn't want him to say that to you, would you?

Would you? And it makes you think, would he? Should I depart from evil? That's to be avoided at all costs.

Let's look at the other group of people, the needy, the poor. And to these people, he will judge, meaning he will bring what's right, because that's what a judge does.

[29 : 10] He will bring decisions for the meek, if I use that translation. Now let me just stop to say, if this isn't a comment on, when it says poor, it's not a comment on your bank account.

This is, the word is used God relationally. It's accounting relationship with God.

How are you with God, rich or poor? And Jesus actually said, in the Sermon on the Mount, later on, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

I think these are on the same tracks. And it's quite a remarkable thing to say, isn't it? Because you'd expect Jesus to say, blessed are the people who know they've got it right.

Blessed are the people who are pleased with themselves. Blessed are the achievers. Blessed are the people who've got nothing to apologize for. And Jesus says the very opposite. He says, you know, those people haven't got it, actually, have they?

[30 : 20] Blessed are the poor in spirit. The people who say, Lord, I haven't done right. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I can look back on my achievements.

And whatever they may be, whatever you've helped me to be, they don't make me right with you. Blessed are the poor in spirit. For theirs is the kingdom of God, Jesus will say. And this judge stands up for those people.

Are you one of those? I said there were two people and one thing. So the two groups of people were the wicked and the poor in spirit, as I've enlarged on that.

What was the one thing? Well, the one thing that I could see was, well, it's a little bit more than one thing, but it's there in verse 9.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[31 : 23] And you remember that was where the description was of these conflicting elements of nature being reconciled. So the lion will lie down with the lamb.

And I think that's a statement about the cosmos. The lion and the lamb bit, I mean. Certainly the last bit is the holy mountain where they will not harm or destroy.

The earth being filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. I think this is a massive mission that this person is going to accomplish.

This is what he's tasked with doing. This is what the prophecy says about him. And when I said one thing, I might have given you the wrong impression because the one thing is everything else.

The one thing is the whole thing. What this is talking about is the whole cosmos. And this person will upcycle the whole cosmos.

[32 : 26] And take it from being a place which contains tsunamis and violence and child abuse and death and sorrow and sickness.

And will in some remarkable way transform it into a place where there is nothing other than life and peace and the glory of God and the knowledge of God.

And what the prophecy couldn't see because it hadn't happened was that that's what happened when Jesus rose from the dead. In his resurrection from the dead, Jesus began this process of taking death and putting it into reverse and bringing life.

It's a huge transaction, a huge achievement. But that's in principle what he did in his resurrection. And that is what he hasn't finished it. He's only just started. But that's what his final mission is according to this prophecy.

Which I think is amazing. No evil, no death, no violence. Of course the challenge of faith is to believe that, isn't it? I suppose the logic of it is to say, well the prophecy was right when it prophesied the baby in the manger.

[33 : 49] Because that was what happened. So why should we stop believing the prophecy when it goes beyond that and says, this is what this baby will ultimately achieve?

Is he big enough to do that? Is he good enough to do that? Has he done enough to do that? When he died on the cross, did he take enough of the evil and sin and penalty and punishment on himself so that after just a few hours of suffering he was able to say, done it.

I think he was. I think he did. That's what the prophecy claims. And you know, if there is somebody who seriously will deal with our world so that there is no more homelessness, no more illness, no more tsunamis, no more exploitation, no more abuse.

Who could fail to be glad about that? It really would be what we sung at the beginning. Joy to the world. Her Lord has come. Let earth receive her king.

Let heaven and nature sing. No more let sins and sorrows grow or thorns infest the ground. I can't remember what it says after that. But that's what he says will change.

[35 : 10] That's a huge, huge agenda. I'm sorry we've gone a huge distance from the baby in the manger. But you can't really, the connections are there. You can't really prevent them from expressing themselves.

Well, we started off looking at one of the prophecies about Jesus. We celebrate his birth at Christmas. And I'd like to say there's actually very deep reasons to celebrate and be glad because it's much more than just the picture on a postcard.

This prophecy was not to mislead us but to motivate us, to open up our hearts and minds to appreciate Jesus. We thought about his special royal family.

We thought about his equipping with the divine spirit. We thought about his righteous, faithful character. And we thought about his mission to slay the wicked, to bless the poor in spirit and to change the whole world.

And I think that's a reason to sing and celebrate, which is what we're going to do as we sing number 376.