

The Peace of Christmas

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[0:00] Isaiah chapter 11, verses 1 through 16. It's been said that a man can live for 40 days without food, for four days without water, for four minutes without air, but he cannot live four seconds without hope.

A life with no hope is not a life, but a life with hope is joy and peace. And the Christmas message is that of hope.

In fact, let me go further. Were it not for the Christian message, there would be no hope. Were it not for the birth of Jesus, there would be nothing to look forward to.

There would be no light in the darkness for anyone and no peace in the storm. Hope is such a small word, but without it, we wouldn't even survive four seconds.

Such a short name, Jesus. But without his coming, we wouldn't survive for even one second.

[1:11] Now, you will know that Isaiah is a book containing many dark and gloom-laden predictions of judgment. But for every gloomy prophecy of judgment, there are two glorious prophecies of joy.

It's often been said of Isaiah 53, that magnificent chapter which deals with the sacrifice of Christ, that Isaiah could have written it from underneath the cross.

I maintain that given the content and the theme of Isaiah, the prophet could have written the whole book full in the face of Jesus, writing it standing beside the manger in which Mary laid her son, writing it from the crowds as Jesus heals a man born blind, writing it in hiding in the court of Pilate as Jesus is condemned to death, writing it from the foot of the cross, writing it from beside the empty tomb of Jesus on the third day.

And Isaiah's overall message is not one of judgment upon God's people, but hope for God's people. Now, this chapter, chapter 11, is one of the most Christmassy, if I may use that phrase, of all Isaiah's chapters, given that it's so filled with hope.

The people to whom Isaiah was writing desperately needed that hope. They were going to be invaded by the vast Assyrian army. And then at some point in the future, they were going to be invaded again by an even greater enemy.

[2:53] And this time, they would be defeated and their nation destroyed. So they, of all people on the face of planet Earth, needed hope.

Their nation faced dark days of judgment. They desperately needed hope. And in this chapter, God gives them the hope they so crave.

A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse. Now, I want us to look together at this chapter, recognizing and appreciating and experiencing for ourselves its message of Jesus as the hope of a darkened world.

Without him, we wouldn't last a second. And I want us to consider three things this morning. First of all, the Christmas King, verses 1 through 9.

Then the Christmas Kingdom, verses 10 and 11. And third, the Christmas Call, from verse 12 through 16. Now, there's a lot in this chapter.

[3:59] So please forgive me if I pick up only on the main points. First of all, then, verses 1 through 9. The Christmas King. Christmas King.

Our passage begins with this remarkable prophecy. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. From his roots, a branch will bear fruit. Now, I have a bush in my front garden that just won't die. I've cut it back to the roots. I've tried to pull out as many of the roots as I can. But still, after a couple of weeks, new shoots come through the ground.

And before long, these shoots are a meter high. The stump of that bush, whatever it is, is not dead. In the same way, the nation of Judah, the people to whom Isaiah is speaking, is going to suffer.

God's going to use this Assyrian threat and then the Babylonian invasion to cut them down to the root. And to all intents and purposes, and especially with respect to their kingly dynasty, they're going to look as though they are finished and dead.

[5:16] But from that stump, which no one can see, there shall come forth a shoot, and the branch shall bear fruit. Now, you will know that Jesse, spoken of here in verse 1, was the father of King David.

And so here in chapter 11, verse 1, Isaiah is prophesying the coming of a king in the line of David. That line, which for all the world seemed to end in captivity in Babylon, Isaiah is telling us, will rise taller, stronger, and more fruitful than ever it was before.

The foolish and evil kings of Judah, culminating in Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, these worthless sons and grandsons of David, ended in Babylon.

But hundreds of years later, a greater son of David will be born, who will be altogether different from these worthless kings.

Whereas they had been barren, he would bear fruit. The character of this king is found in verses 2 through 5. A king upon whom the spirit of the Lord shall rest.

[6:36] Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and of might. The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

Possessed not by his own wicked desires, as had been the kings of Judah, but by the wisdom and the fear of the Lord. He will have no interest in personal wealth or the accumulation of worldly possessions.

Rather, this king shall be interested only in the well-being and shalom of his people. Because the spirit of the Lord rests upon him, he will govern righteousness and with compassion, fairness, and equity.

He shall not allow the innocent to be punished and the guilty to go unpunished. Rather, as we read in verse 5, righteousness shall be the belt of his waist and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

His primary interest shall not be in the rich, but in the needy. Not in the wealthy, but in the poor.

However, he will not be swayed by the most persuasive or those with the deepest pockets.

[7:46] Rather, he shall judge by what he sees. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, as we read in verse 3, or decide by what he hears with his ears.

He will not judge by external appearances. Rather, he shall see through the pretense of the hypocrite. The reign of this king is found in verses 6 through 9.

It's a reign characterized by peace, shalom. The wolf will live with the lamb. The cow will feed with the bear. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra.

And the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. These are such beautiful words. They paint for us a paradise.

You see, the reigns of the kings of Judah were characterized by war and violence, by grief and by pain. Children were often the first victims of a siege.

[8:52] Strong warriors, the last. There was no peace. There was no possibility of peace. The nations surrounding Judah were aggressive and strong.

And the Old Testament is the story of the people of God's conflict with the nations. Nations with awe-inspiring kings, famous for their cruelty, ferocity, and singular lack of mercy.

But this king, the messianic king, born of the line of David, will be stronger by far. So strong that his goodness shall subdue their evil and his love will overcome their hatred.

No army sent against him will pose even a threat to him. So much so that his people shall lie down in peace and safety. In a reign of which Solomon's was just a shadow, this Messiah will pacify the nations.

As we read in verse 9, The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Such hope you see for the desperate people of Judah, so threatened by foreign armies at this time.

[10:15] Such hope that a Messiah is going to come. A king of the line of David, but altogether greater than David. Who's going to succeed where David failed. And he's going to rule with compassion and the words that

even Solomon lacked.

And where shall this all begin? Where shall this king come from? From where shall the king upon whom the spirit of the Lord's power rest?

From where shall he arise? He shall be born of the womb of the blessed virgin. He shall be born in humility and lowliness.

And as a baby he shall be laid in a manger because there should be no room in the inn. He shall be born in weakness. This baby boy, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in his mother's arms.

Here, here in the arms of Mary, is the glorious hope, not just of Judah, but as we see the whole world. This child born in Bethlehem.

[11:24] A child upon whom the spirit of the Lord rests. And whose righteousness and faithfulness shall be our standard. A child whose reign is that of the Prince of Peace. And whose kingdom, the shalom, wholeness and peace of God shall triumph.

This is our Christmas king. Not so cute, shall we say, as away in a manger. But more kingly, as in glory to the newborn king.

Starts in a stable. Not in a palace. Begins in a manger. Not on the throne. But this Jesus, born of the blessed virgin Mary, shall reign as king.

Not just over his people. But over the whole world. That's the hope of Christmas. The Jesus who was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

The Jesus the church adores and worships. Without him, you know it's not worth taking another breath. But with him and in him and for him, we're going to live in peace forever and ever.

[12:36] The Christmas king. Second, in verses 10 and 11, the Christmas kingdom. The Christmas kingdom.

Now, Isaiah 11 verses 10 and 11 form the central pivot around which the whole of the chapter revolves. You can see that from the way in which the text is presented in our English Bibles. Verses 1 through 9 are laid out in poetic format. As are verses 12 through 16. But verses 10 and 11 are laid out in a prose, almost narrative type format.

They function, you see, as the central pivot to which verses 1 through 9 lead. And from which 12 through 16 flow. Both verses begin with the words, In that day.

In that day. Words which are frequently used in the prophetic bookings. Books of the Old Testament. To point to the days of the Messiah. The last days. These words point to two eras in the future.

[13:49] The first is the days we're in today. After the first coming of Jesus. Loosely speaking, the days of the church.

The days where we celebrate Christ's first coming. The days when the church celebrates Christmas, Easter, Ascension. The second era points to that which has not yet come to pass.

The second coming of Jesus. Loosely speaking, the days of the glory of King Jesus. Where having returned, he shall once for all put his enemies under his feet.

And the lowliness of Bethlehem. The day of Bethlehem shall be overcome and overwhelmed by the majesty of the new heavens and the new earth. When the prophets used the phrase, in that day, sometimes they are corresponding to one era.

And sometimes to the other era. And sometimes the prophets leave it undefined because they want to apply their words to both eras. The messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ, both in time and in eternity.

[15:03] Both in heaven and on earth. Both in humility and in glory. And I believe here in Isaiah 11 verses 10 and 11, we have one such example where what Isaiah prophesies can be applied to both eras.

The eras after Christ's first coming. That's the era in which we live now. And the era after his second coming. And the point's this.

The application of this passage is not exhausted by the events of history up to this point. There's still much to be achieved. There's still much ground to be covered.

There are still more victories over darkness to be won. Not all recognize in Jesus the stump of Jesse and the righteous branch. Not all think that Jesus, that the spirit of God rests upon him and that in him is all love and righteousness.

Not all welcome the peace giving reign of the Jesus who was born in a stable and laid in a manger. Not all of a sudden. Not all of a sudden. Not all of a sudden. In our own time, the church is growing faster than at any previous point in history.

[16:14] But there is still more to be achieved. There is still more ground to be covered. There are still more victories over darkness to be won. Every knee has not bowed before Jesus Christ, nor has every tongue confessed that he's Lord.

More on this in a moment. What I also want you to notice from these two verses, verses 10 and 11, is the emphasis upon the kingdom of Christ being a resting place.

A resting place. The people of God are alarmed. They are afraid. They face an uncertain future. Invasion after invasion. Violence. War. And death. Many of them face captivity and exile. To put it mildly, they're anxious and unsettled.

What it must have meant for them to hear these wonderful words. That the days of the Messiah will herald the coming of the kingdom of rest.

[17:29] The Hebrew word translated as resting place in verse 10 can also be translated as home. Home. It was another way of referring to Israel as the promised land where God's people were at home with him.

He made it his home. And as long as he was there with them, it was their home also. And that's the central pivot of this chapter.

We might say, at rest with the Messiah. At rest with the Messiah. Jesus said, come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

He promises us the messianic rest of Isaiah 11. The shalom, the wholeness of the kingdom of God. For many of us, Christmas isn't a time of rest at all.

But a time of frenetic worry and busyness. We've forgotten that Christ came to give us rest. The rest of being at home with him. I'm not talking here of the pietistic home with Jesus, referring to heaven.

[18:40] Lovely thought that, but that's not what we're talking about here. I'm talking of that sense of being settled. Of being at rest. Of being calm in the knowledge that Jesus is our Savior, King.

That he's in sovereign control of all things in our lives. To the extent that he is working all things together, however hard they may be. For our good.

On our behalf. He will always be with us. He'll never leave us. He'll never forsake us. Home is where the heart is.

Home for the Christian at Christmas is a lowly stable in Bethlehem. Where the great God of heaven became a newborn child in his mother's arms.

Home is where God has come to redeem a sinful humanity unto himself. Home is where the heavy laden shed their heavy loads.

[19:48] And the weary are strengthened by the grace of Christ. The Christmas kingdom, you see, is gospel. It's gospel from beginning to end. The good news of Messiah who has become one of us.

One with us. One for us. And who in the likeness of sinful flesh has won our salvation. Whatever Jesus is, that's home for us.

And by the power of the Holy Spirit and through faith in Jesus, he is at home in you. Home is where the heart is.

Home is Jesus' Christmas kingdom of rest. You know, in a world which just seems so hopeless at the moment, there's hope here for the Christian.

Hope for even the most despairing Christian. Jesus' kingdom of rest. The Christmas king, the Christmas kingdom, and then thirdly from verse 12 to 16, the Christmas call, the Christmas call.

[21:03] Well, if verses 1 through 9 form one long poem, and verses 10 and 11 are short connecting narrative of prose, then verses 12 through 16 form the second poem in Isaiah 11.

The first of these poems concentrate on Jesus as king. The connecting narrative focuses on the kingdom of Jesus. The second poem focuses upon the citizens of Christ's kingdom.

Those God is going to call to take their places in his great kingdom of rest under the infinitely wise and loving lordship of Christ Jesus.

Now, let me remind you of the context of Isaiah chapter 11. The nation of Judah is going to be invaded by the vast Assyrian army.

The neighboring northern ten kingdom of Israel is going to be invaded also. And it will fall. It will never rise again.

[22:14] Its people will be scattered to the four ends of the earth. But the southern kingdom of Judah will not fall to this Assyrian threat. Read the story of the times of King Hezekiah and how God miraculously delivered the nation of Judah from the Assyrians.

But Isaiah's got something else in mind. About 130 years after the Assyrian invasion, destruction of Israel, and invasion of Judah, the even mightier Babylonian empire will invade the kingdom of Judah.

And this time, Judah shall be overrun. Jerusalem shall be destroyed. And Judah's people taken into exile. So these are the days of Daniel and of Esther, where for 70 years, God's people are held captive in Babylon.

Now, when we talk about being held captive in Babylon, we have to understand the geopolitics of Babylon. It was an empire more than a city.

And as such, it covered a vast swathe of the ancient Middle East. Some of those who were taken into captivity from Judah were taken to the capital city of Babylon.

[23:35] But the vast majority were exiled to remote outposts of the empire. To the north, to the south, to the east, to the west, to the farthest flung parts. We read Psalm 120 in our morning devotions this week.

Some of these parts. So this makes sense of verse 12, when it says of the messianic kingdom, that in that day, God shall raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Just like God called his people from slavery in Egypt, so he's going to call them from captivity in Babylon. He's going to call them, and he's going to bring them out of slavery and captivity.

He's going to rescue them, and return them to the promised land. Now, what's significant about these verses in Isaiah chapter 11, is that the prophet is speaking not just of the southern kingdom of Judah, which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., but he is also referring, in verse 12 there, to the northern kingdom of Israel, which was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

These two kingdoms, so tragically divided by the foolishness of Solomon's son Rehoboam, will, in the messianic kingdom of Jesus, be reunited, and God's people shall be one again.

[25:10] The point is this. From whatever obscure outpost of the Babylonian empire, and however long it takes, God's going to call his people home.

God's going to make a way for them to come home. And God's going to go and get them from where they are, in captivity and slavery, and deliver them from their bondage.

He will be their liberator. He will be their savior. As we read in verse 16, there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up out of the land of Egypt.

God's going to do something amazing, something miraculous to turn around the fortunes of his people in exile. He's going to call them home.

And more than that, he's going to fetch them home. You know, I sometimes wonder whether Jesus had these prophecies in mind when he spoke about a son who ran away from his father to a far-off country and there wasted his inheritance before he came to his senses and returned to him.

[26:27] the parable of the prodigal son. Or whether Jesus was thinking about Isaiah 11 when he told a parable about a shepherd who, having lost one of his sheep, placed the other 99 in a pen and then went looking for that one sheep until he found it.

And having draped that sheep across his shoulders, he brought the sheep home. As we apply this into the New Testament age, we hear the voice of Jesus calling to us from the stable in Bethlehem, come and worship.

And we hear the voice of Jesus calling to us from the cross on Golgotha's hill. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden. Come to me and I'll give you rest.

And then we hear him speaking again. All that the father gives to me shall come to me. Christ is calling to you today from our far country of sin and lostness, of despair and darkness, to come to him.

To come home to him. This Christmas king, he calls to us and he summons us and he raises the banner of his cross over us and he fetches us.

[27:58] Oh, sinner, come home! Will you hear the voice of the Christmas king as he calls to you to return to his Christmas kingdom? Will you hear him?

Will you respond in faith and trust? But more so, oh, so much more so is to come. For the Christmas king does not really call to us.

He comes to us and fetches us to himself. like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible. He sends his spirit to pluck us from the darkness and to bring us into his kingdom.

He sends his spirit to change our hearts and wills to fill us with the knowledge of our need of him and his sufficiency as a savior.

He sends his spirit with irresistible force to point to the stable and to the cross and to the empty tomb. Oh, sinner, he says to us, come home.

[29:07] It has been said that a man may live for 40 days without food, for four days without water, for four minutes without air, but barely four seconds without hope. What hope Isaiah 11 brings to us this dark, COVID-plagued Christmas?

It brings to us the hope of the Christmas king, the Christmas kingdom, and the Christmas call. Jesus Christ is born and Jesus Christ has died.

Jesus Christ is risen and Jesus Christ reigns. people of God, fill yourself with the hope of the gospel of our glorious Christmas king.