

A New World? Child's Play / Nine Lessons and Carols

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[0 : 00] Well, it would not be very difficult for God to say in plain language that the one born in Bethlehem is my son, the eternal Lord, and you should worship him and bow before him and you'll be saved.

And there are parts of the Bible where God does speak a bit like that. And so you may be asking, why do we need nine lessons and nine carols? I mean, why does God reveal himself over thousands of years in 66 books of the Bible?

Why all the fuss? I think it has something to do with the greatness of the gift and the smallness of our hearts. We have shriveled imaginations.

Our dreams and our hopes are so low and dull. And we're so self-absorbed and unthankful. And so God reveals himself with excessive images so as to show his great kindness.

And as we absorb them, he stretches our hearts to make them big enough to understand something of the knowledge of God and of his love.

[1 : 18] I mean, take Isaiah 11 that was read for us a little earlier. It begins with a picture of the family tree of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

700 years before Christ is born. And Jesus' family tree is the one tree in the forest which has been cut down, rotten to the core, fallen, burnt in a fire, and all that remains is a blackened stump.

In Australia, when you want to say something is completely beyond hope, so remote you can't find it, you say it's beyond the black stump. Because the black stump is the last thing of all last things.

And Isaiah 11 opens with this image of a black stump. And the tragedy is that God had made his people to be a garden. And now there's nothing left but a lonely stump.

We read these words, There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, a branch from the roots that will bear fruit.

[2 : 32] It's very good news. Jesse was the father of King David. He came from a nowhere place. And the family tree had seemed to come to a complete end.

But God promises new life. A shoot that will spring up. And a shoot that is going to bear fruit. And the fruit that's described in many images in this chapter brings a completely new world.

A world of restoration, of renewal, of recreation. Until the branches spread itself over the entire world. And in these few minutes, I want to direct you to what God says about the shoot and the fruit.

And the passage covers a vast amount of ground. It takes us high into the mind of Jesus Christ himself. And then it takes us very wide into the practical results of what he's come to do.

Firstly, the righteous shoot. And keep in mind that the child born at Bethlehem, the child in the manger, is the subject of this passage in Isaiah 11.

[3 : 44] He already told us in chapter 9, he'll be born of a virgin. He'll come as a great light to those who dwell in darkness. He will come into a world without peace, as the prince of peace, to establish peace.

And now he goes further and takes us higher into what we cannot see for ourselves, into Christ's own inner relationship with God, his Father.

And we read that the child will have the spirit of God resting, dwelling on him permanently. Because if this is the prince of peace, and if he's coming to establish peace, he's going to have to deal with violence, and injustice, and tribalism, and racism, and every other ism.

And all the weapons and armies, and all the human ingenuity that we can come up with, just won't do it. He needs the Holy Spirit of God.

He needs God's own wisdom and understanding. He needs to be able to see as God sees, past our lies and pretense to what lies at the heart.

[4 : 59] We are slaves to our eyes and our ears, to what's superficial. I look at you, you look fantastic. But that's completely superficial.

He's so easily persuaded by externals. The shoot of Jesse, the Son of God, is completely unimpressed by externals.

He does not judge by what he sees, or by what he hears with his ear. Because of the closeness of his connection with the Father, his delight, his true pleasure, is in the fear of the Lord.

And that means he not only sees as God sees, he decides as God decides. It's exactly what we saw when Jesus comes as a man in the Gospels.

It's not that he was just kind to the powerless and the poor and nasty to the wealthy and privileged. It just means he couldn't be bought or prejudiced or swayed by poverty or by wealth.

[5 : 58] Since his delight is in the right place, he's not like any other human leader. He doesn't value people by what he gets from us, but by what he gives to us.

He doesn't judge others harshly like we do. He cannot be corrupted. We heard these words in verse 4, with righteousness he judges the poor, with equity he decides for the meek.

This is not just the financially poor, this is those who recognize their need of him irrespective of what they've done. The righteous shoot.

And what does it look like when he comes to establish peace? Well, it looks like very radical fruit indeed. And I don't know how you respond when you hear about the wolf lying down with the lamb.

At first glance, it feels a bit like a Disney movie where all the animals flock around Snow White. But it's a picture of our future to stretch our hearts to imagination what the rule of Jesus Christ will one day mean for us and his world.

[7 : 06] And it's a picture of complete renewal of a peace-saturated world where all the old hostilities that we've worked on for many generations are replaced with restoration and redemption.

And the point is, there's more than just no longer predator and prey, but the nature of nature is different. The point about the animals is it helps us imagine the unimaginably radical change that Christ is going to bring in us.

That's why the Christmas carols that we've been singing and hearing take such poetic license with creation. It's not pagan nature worship. It's the images of positive peace that the Prince of Peace will bring.

I mean, already in this service, we've heard about oxen standing by the lowly stable. We've heard about serpents and rams and donkeys of heaven and nature singing of fields and floods, rocks, hills, plains, repeating the sounding joy.

because the righteous shoot brings radical fruit, a transformation in creation itself. Let me read you those verses again.

[8 : 22] The wolf shall dwell with the lamb. The leopard shall lie down with the young goat and the calf and the lion and the fatted calf together. And then he says, the little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, the young shall lie down together and the lion shall eat straw like an ox. See, in the Bible, peace is not just the absence of hostility.

Peace means the positive presence of some form of fullness and purpose. See, in this world, a wolf usually looks like a lamb as fast food.

See, this is not even a full-grown sheep. This is a tender, young lamb. But something has radically changed, hasn't it? I mean, it's not just the wolf has gone on a vegan diet or he's on his best behaviour.

It's not that the lamb has learnt martial arts and weaponised his front door. In both of them, there's been an unimaginable change where their hostility has been replaced with genuine friendship.

[9 : 30] This is a key word, this word dwell. It talks about the sacred rules of hospitality. The wolf travels a long distance to visit his friend, the lamb, to hang out together.

The lamb is busy making preparation, waiting for the visit of his friend, making up the spare room and he has to make up the spare room because the young goat and the leopard have taken the futon in the dining room.

And he hears the wolf knock at the door and he calls out for the wolf to let himself in and as the wolf comes to the lamb in the kitchen, he presents him with a cake which has on the top of it mi casa e su casa.

And he says, we're going to have a games night tonight with the lion and the fattened calf next door and our special guest will be a six-year-old child who will lead us. It's unimaginable apart from the kingdom of Christ.

But this is the radical fruit of the coming of the shoot because the blessing of God and the peace of God is not airy-fairy, it's not highfalutin, it has to do with domestic pleasure and enjoyment.

[10 : 37] What was ferocious and savage and violent will be removed and replaced with what is mutually comforting and joyful. And in case we miss the reversal, in verse 8 we read this, the nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den because Christ comes to reverse the curse.

This is a highly poisonous and deadly snake and these snakes conjure up a deeper evil that we heard about in our first reading, the serpent in the garden of Eden who led man and woman to choose sight over faith, their own perception over God's word, to choose obedience to the serpent rather than to God.

We are far more deeply involved and implicated in the curse than we imagine. This is not just something for other people, this is why we're so ungrateful, this is why we don't love God with all our hearts naturally, this is why we find it hard to love even our friends, this is why our ambitions and dreams are so self-focused and it's why there was such noise at that first Christmas, angels and stars and shepherds and wise men because the coming of Christ doesn't just exterminate snakes, that's not what it's about, it reverses the curse, it enables snakes to find their true snakeiness as it were, as the child reaches into the rattler's den and rattles away and the snake loves it.

And the point of these pictures is that it's helping us to understand the vast and imaginable change Christ brings. And we're meant to say, if this can happen for animals, if animals are changed at their core, what will be the change for us?

Because it was the effects of our sin and rebellion that set the animals against each other in the first place. And if the righteous root can replace the violence and deadliness with pleasure and play, what kind of restoration can he make in you and me?

[12 : 58] And that's why we meet and hear and sing tonight, that's why we pray and seek God, we long for this restoration. We long to be saved from curse and enter into this blessing and peace of God.

The great wonder of this time of year is that God has begun to make good on his promise here. The child has been born. That means you don't need to make Christmas special.

It already is. And since the child has been born, God has begun to roll back the curse. And if you read to the end of this book, Isaiah, you'll discover it takes more than the birth of the Prince of Peace to secure our peace.

It takes his death because the curse cannot be reversed apart from death. And in his death, we read in Isaiah, Jesus takes the curse onto himself and he suffers death and he drains the curse of all its poison so that he might give us blessing.

We read, he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

[14 : 16] And with his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

So as we hear and as we participate, we approach Jesus Christ and worship him as the righteous shoot. We thank God for the radical fruit and we pray for that day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Amen.