

The Mission of the Servant

(Note: This lesson focuses on Christmastime, but the message is applicable even after Christmas)

Lesson Text: Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-8 **Background Scripture:** Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-9; Matthew 1:18-25

Devotional Reading: Matthew 1:21-23

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 11:1-8

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. ²The 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. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; ⁴but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. ⁵Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. ⁶The 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. ⁷The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

INTRODUCTION At this time of the year, Christmas programs, plays, musicals, and sermons dominate the average church's calendar. They provide a needed reminder of the arrival of the Son of God in history.

Two passages of Scripture seem to predominate at Christmas: the visit of the shepherds (Luke 2:1-20) and the arrival of the wise men (Matt. 2:1-12). Other texts give additional insights, but these two provide the basic details of Christ's birth.

Often overlooked, however, are many Old Testament prophecies related to the coming of Christ. While some speak about the actual birth of the Messiah, others detail His work. Fulfilled prophecy is one of several reasons we can believe that the Bible is the Word of God.

While skeptics claim that Christ merely arranged certain events to fulfill prophecy. He could not have arranged the events of His birth. The time, place, and circumstances of His arrival were clearly foretold by the prophets. We have the “sure word of prophecy” (II Peter 1:19).

LESSON BACKGROUND **Time:** about 700–695 B.C. **Place:** Jerusalem

Some of the earliest Greek philosophers believed that war was inevitable and that nations at war were the norm rather than the exception. Heraclitus of Ephesus, one such philosopher, wrote about 200 years after Isaiah. Heraclitus summed up the thinking of many before and after him when he said, “War is the father and king of all.” Heraclitus is most known for his theory that everything is in a state of flux, constantly changing. The only constant, for him, is change. “You cannot step into the same river twice,” because it will have changed between steppings. This dynamic view of the universe is reflected in his understanding of war. For Heraclitus, nations could not live in static, peaceful coexistence. They constantly bickered, postured, and warred.

To a large degree, Isaiah and his countrymen would have agreed with these observations. They had kings who used brief times of peace to rearm and prepare for war. They experienced the mighty, marauding armies of Egypt and Assyria marching across their lands. There seemed to be no other existence than war or the threat of war.

This brutal geopolitical situation continued up until the time of Jesus. In the decades before His birth in Bethlehem, the Mediterranean basin was rocked repeatedly by the foreign and civil wars of the Romans. In 27 BC, these wars ended when the great-nephew of Julius Caesar emerged triumphant and began to reign as Caesar Augustus.

A peace spread over the Roman territories, including Palestine. This is known as the Pax Romana, Roman Peace. It lasted for about 2000 years. Yet it was an easy peace that was enforced by the stationing of Roman legions throughout the empire—a peace enforced by military threat. It was marred by various rebellions such as the Jewish Revolt of AD 66-73, which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Our world is not much difficult today. Countries still have large armies and arsenals of weapons. War can, and does, erupt with little warning (compare Matthew 24:6). True peace will come only from God's intervention, from the universal reign of His chosen Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

TODAY'S AIM

- **Facts:** to show us that Jesus the Messiah came as a servant according to prophecy and the plan of God.
- **Principle:** to demonstrate that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of the mission of the Servant-Messiah.
- **Application:** to see that when we follow the example of the Servant-Messiah, we will become effective servants of God.

The Promise Of A Son (Isaiah 9:6,7)

This is a favorite verse of the Christmas season, giving a prophetic taste of the coming Messiah. The Messiah would be born as a child, but He would be no ordinary child. He would be a Son given for redemption of Israel—and for the whole world (John 3:16; 12:32).

Isaiah 9:6 is a powerful prophecy of the divine Messiah. Notice that the prophecy begins with the announcement of the gift of a son, the birth of a child, as an event already accomplished. Messiah's coming was an accomplished fact in the mind of God from the inception of His creation. Just as Christ is "*the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.*" (Rev. 13:8), so He is likewise the eternal Son, and His incarnation is an eternally decreed event. Even before any human being had sinned, God had determined His plan to redeem sinners from the righteous wrath that was their just punishment.

1. How does the promise of a "child" and a "son" (Isaiah 9:6) fit into the general context of Isaiah?

Isaiah follows this announcement with four marvelous descriptions of this one to come. First, He will be known as the Wonderful Counsellor. Some have separated these into two names, but Isaiah most likely intended us to hear him speak of a Counsellor who is Wonderful.

We have weakened the meaning of wonderful in the English language. Today this word means something like "really, really good." The original intent, though, is something that causes a jaw-dropping sense of astonishment. When one experiences the wonderful in this sense, one knows that this is a miraculous work of God Almighty (see Isaiah 29:14). To combine this with the function of counselor means that Isaiah foresees someone who knows all the questions and has all the answers. This can be only God himself (compare 25:1).

The second prophetic designation amplifies this by saying the coming child will be The mighty God. The descriptive word mighty is drawn from the world of war heroes (compare Genesis 10:8). We might liken this to our term invincible, the one who cannot be defeated. The coming child will not be bested by any army, either human or demonic, in the reign of His universal government (see Isaiah 42:13).

Third, the child is to be given the title of The everlasting Father, identifying Him even more specifically with the Lord God of Israel. The concept of eternity was difficult to grasp in Isaiah's day and remains so for us. The eternality of God, however, is a characteristic that sets Him apart in a decisive way (see Isaiah 57:15). The Old Testament rarely uses the term Father to refer to God (for a few places where it does, see Psalm 68:5; 89:26; Malachi 2:10). It remains for Jesus to teach humans that God is our Father in a universal, loving way. It is to our heavenly Father that we are taught to pray for His gracious daily provisions (Matthew 6:11). Isaiah prophesies that, in a way that is beyond our complete understanding, the child is to be the embodiment of the Father.

Fourth, the child to come will be The Prince of Peace. This is not prince in the sense of a junior king or a king-in-waiting. Rather, it is prince in the sense of ruler of a people, a virtual synonym with "king" or "monarch." Jesus' dominion will be characterized by peace, not war. His agenda will be reconciliation and shalom.

2. What titles are given to the Messiah in verse 6?

What Do You Think?

In what specific ways has Jesus been the Prince of Peace in your life?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In calming a certain storm of life
- In calming you rather than calming a life storm
- Luke 12:51; John 14:27; 16:33

It is easy to imagine that Isaiah's original hearers think that he is talking about a coming king who will reign in Jerusalem. To be sure, this will be an extraordinary ruler. The coming child is to be in a different category from any earthly monarch. His reign is to be characterized in five ways that no normal human ruler can ever measure up to.

First, His reign is to be endlessly increasing, as opposed to the rise and fall of empires throughout history. Second, it is to be endlessly peaceful, never at war or preparing for war. Third, it is to be tied to the most beloved ruler of Israel, King David. Fourth, it is to be established on true justice, not on the "might makes right" philosophy. Fifth, its existence and increase are guaranteed by the zeal of the Lord. This is to be a primary matter for the all-powerful God of Israel. Such zeal cannot be thwarted by anyone or anything.

3. How did Isaiah characterize the coming child's reign? How would he establish unending peace (v. 7)?

The Hope of Peace

Frances, the wife of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, died tragically on July 10, 1861. Her dress had caught fire the previous day in an accident involving a candle.

Longfellow sank into a depression. It deepened late in 1863 when he received word that his son Charles had been wounded in battle during the American Civil War. Finally, as the war was nearing its end, Longfellow's spirits seemed to improve. For Christmas 1864, Longfellow penned the lines of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," one of the most famous Christmas carols. Part of the carol tells of the tragedy of war, but also of the hope that Christmas brings:

*And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said.
"For hate is strong, / And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men."
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The wrong shall fail, / The right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

May that be the message that is ever in our hearts! May the Prince of Peace reign among us! —C. R. B.

***Questions 4-6 breakdown verse 7**

When the Bible speaks of peace as given by God, it means more than lack of fighting. It refers to a healthy, reconciled relationship. It means the things that cause conflict have been resolved. There is no more need or desire to fight. A situation of peace as granted by God is a promise for future health and prosperity (compare Judges 6:23).

All things that cause a breakdown in the peace between God and humans will be gone.

Those who come to Christ have "peace with God" (Rom. 5:1) and enjoy a peace that passes understanding (Phil.4:7). We are to "live in peace" (2 Cor. 13:11) with one another and permit the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of peace in our lives (Gal 5:22). "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9).

4. In what ways did Christ bring peace to earth?

From another perspective, thought, Christ did don't come to bring peace, He said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matt. 10:34). He did not bring peace to the

legalistic Pharisees, the aristocratic Sadducees, or the autocratic Roman rulers. Indeed, He “make peace through the blood of His cross” (Col.1:20), but this is available only to those who surrender to Him. In the end, however, peace will come to the earth. But this will not be because all have received Him but because He will have “*destroyed all dominion, authority and power*” (1 Cor.15:24).

5. What are some ways that Christ did not bring peace?

When Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her that the Child would “*be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,* ³³*and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*” (Luke 1:32-33). These words echo the prophecy given hundreds of years before.

Here again we see the emphasis on the lineage of David. For Isaiah’s contemporaries, this authenticated what they had already heard about the Messiah and the manner of His coming. For us today, it is an assurance that what the prophet said hundreds of years ago is true to the last letter. Blessed Branch (Isaiah 11:1)

6. How does Christ fulfill the promises made to David?

Isaiah’s vision of the Messiah in chapter 9 is of a perfect ruler. Here in chapter 11, Isaiah uses a different way of describing the coming one: as a branch growing from the stem of Jesse. This ties the Messiah to King David, the physical son of a man named Jesse (Luke 2:4). The “stem of Jesse” (11:1) is a reference to David and, ultimately, to the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Sam. 7:16).

That Christ is referred to as the Branch is significant. The Hebrew word is related to the word “Nazarene,” another designation of Christ (cf. Matt 2:23; 21:11; Acts 24:5).

7. How is the name “Branch” (11:1) related to the New Testament?

The Promise Of The Spirit (Isaiah 11:2-5)

The coming one will be endowed with the spirit of the Lord, An infallible guide. The result will be an astonishing package of spiritual maturity: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, and knowledge. Isaiah reminds us here of the wisdom tradition of Israel as found in the book of Proverbs. That book teaches that these attributes originate in a person’s fear of the Lord (see Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; compare Isaiah 33:6).

The fear of the Lord is not lingering terror of God that causes us to hide and avoid Him. Rather, it is a profound reverence for our Creator. It is a recognition of the vast difference between mortals and the master of the universe. It does not prevent us from loving God and knowing that He loves us, because in so doing we appreciate the great gulf that is bridged for our salvation (Romans 5:8).

8. Who will enable the Messiah to rule? (v. 2)

The Messiah will not be influenced by a person’s economic status, etc. This judge, God’s holy branch, will be a champion of the poor and oppressed in their constant battle against the wicked.

The Messiah’s power will not be in armies, but in a message. The prophet gives a double description of this concept: the rod of his mouth and the breath of his lips.

This is Spirit-empowered proclamation, the gospel news of peace and of the reign of God (Isaiah 52:7). Earthly sources of power will fail, but the Spirit of the Lord provides inexhaustible power to the Messiah (see Zechariah 4:6).

9. How will the Messiah rule (vs. 3-5)?

The Promise Of Security (Isaiah 11:6-8)

While some interpreters see such harmony in nature as symbolizing spiritual realities, many believe that this will actually occur, either during the millennium or in the eternal kingdom.

Since wolves, leopards, lions, and bears are predators, they can quickly decimate a flock or herd. Yet the picture here is one of peace and harmony, likely akin to what was experienced in the Garden of Eden.

The fact that these otherwise vicious animals will docilely follow a small child depicts a time of unprecedented peace on earth. "...because the Messiah is "God [is] with us" (7:14) and He will be dwelling with His people, it need not be difficult to envision these changes in nature" (Walvoord and Zuck).

10. How can the references to wild animals being harmless be understood? Do you think this literal or symbolic? Why? (vs. 6-8)

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Depend on God to always keep His promises (Isaiah 9:6 cf. Matthew 1:21; Gal.4:4).
2. One day the entire world will see Jesus for all that He really is (Isa. 9:6,7).
3. Jesus, the God-Man, is our perfect example (11:1,2).
4. The justice of Jesus may be delayed. But it is sure (Isa. 11:3,4).
5. The millennial kingdom of Jesus will be characterized by faithfulness to God's Words and will (Isa. 11:5,6).
6. The harmony that Jesus brings will affect all of creation in the millennium (vs. 6- 8).

CONCLUSION

Paul presents the accomplishments of Jesus on the cross as going beyond Isaiah's description of the coming Prince of Peace. Jesus is more than the bringer of peace. Paul says, "*He is our peace*" (Eph. 2:14). Paul goes on to say that Jesus has "broken down" the wall that divides Jew from Gentile, and at the same time, Jesus' work on the cross has reconciled both groups to God (2:15). In the Christmas seas, we often see cards wishing for "*peace on earth*" (see Luke 2:14). Christians understand that this is more than a disbanding of earthly armies. It is the promise of reconciliation between God and human beings, which makes possible the reconciliation of all men and women. He is our Peace, the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ Our Lord.

PRAYER

Mighty God, we thank You for peace You bring to our lives through Your gracious forgiveness. We look forward to the day when all will be subject to Your Son, our glorious Prince of Peace. It is in His name we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Our King is the eternal Prince of Peace.