

“God Reigns”

Lesson Text: Isaiah 52:7-12 **Background Scripture:** Isaiah 52:1-12

Devotional Reading: Colossians 3:8-17

Isaiah 52:7–12 (NIV)

⁷ How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” ⁸ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. ⁹ Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God. ¹¹ Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the articles of the Lord’s house. ¹² But you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To identify the “good news.”
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain the reason for the good news.
- **Daily Application:** To describe ways to proclaim the good news today.

INTRODUCTION

The Power of Announcements

One of the more impactful inventions of the late 1800s, though not one we notice often, was the color poster. This was due to improvements in photography, papermaking, and printing. As a result, businesspeople, artists, preachers, and government leaders could suddenly advertise ideas and experiences to the general public in artistically interesting ways.

Today, many of those early posters are collectors’ items, commanding six-figure prices at auction. But originally they simply made announcements in inviting ways: “Your country needs you” ... “Buy our medicine” ... “Come to the circus” ... The message drew viewers into the world of the creators, passing along not just information but values, feelings, and obligations.

The ancient audience of the book of Isaiah never saw a poster, of course. But they did experience the power of announcements to motivate, precisely because the announcement contained more than information. The people were being invited to experience a new world, to feel differently about themselves, and to reclaim the values they thought they had lost. The good news being announced would radically change their lives and the lives of their descendants.

LESSON CONTEXT

In the ancient world, heralds traveled from the capital to smaller cities, reporting the decrees of the king or news of war and peace (example: Habakkuk 2:2). Isaiah 40 begins a large section (of which chapter 52, today’s lesson, is part) with the image of a herald announcing good news. And in some sense the entirety of chapters 40–55 could be seen as one single announcement by just such a person. For the ancient hearers of the contents of this text, the auditory was more important than the visual, particularly if they were unable to read. But the power of the announcement was present either way. So we might think of these verses as a sort of audio poster, an announcement depicting a new world in which the audience could imagine themselves taking part.

Isaiah 52 falls into five sections: verses 1–2, 3–6, 7–10, 11–12, and 13–15. Each of the first four sections

invites exiled Israelites to return home because Babylon is about to fall to the Persians under Cyrus the Great (see Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13). The poems in these four sections personify Zion as a woman, and depict the period of exile as one of slumber for the ancient city. A rebuilt Jerusalem would welcome home her returning children. The holy and ethical acts to which the prophets had always called the people could be embraced anew as Jerusalem was given another chance to live up to her calling and potential.

A Call to Rejoice: Isaiah 52:7-10

Paul quoted this verse in Romans 10:15 as part of his discussion about the relationship between preaching and faith. The good news affects the one announcing it as well as the hearers. The prophet's *feet* become *beautiful* inasmuch as the message is beautiful. In the book of Isaiah, however, the verse has a more specific reference: it describes the one announcing the good news of the return from Babylonian exile to the homeland of Israel and especially to Jerusalem.

The first part of the verse takes the reader back to chapter 40, the beginning of the book's celebration of the return from exile. The verse before us extols the proclaimer—here the same people invited to announce God's comfort to Jerusalem in Isaiah 40:1–3. They do so *on the mountains* as in Isaiah 40:9, not only so they can be heard across the valleys, but also because the Israelite homeland was mountainous in contrast to the flat plains of Babylonia.

The message of *good tidings* has important content, namely *peace* and *salvation* (rescue). Israelites will experience the end of their suffering at the hands of the Babylonians in a way somewhat similar to the exodus from Egypt, which happened hundreds of years earlier. The deliverance to come would (or should) lead to good, ethical behavior. Properly practiced, that behavior will result, in turn, in social harmony and fairness. But that would happen only if the people were to commit themselves to the message. In contrast to the degradation that Israel had known under its foreign captors, they would come to final realization that “Your God reigns!” People who believe that God reigns live in hope of the time when all the evils of the world will disappear and goodness will triumph.

1. How did Isaiah describe the one who will bring the good news to the exiled Israelites? (Isaiah 52:7a)

What Do You Think?

What practical results do you see when you fully trust that God reigns?

Digging Deeper

How do you cling to this same truth when it doesn't appear—in the moment—that God is reigning?

The prophet imagines the city of Jerusalem after it is rebuilt and its staff of night watchmen put to work.

Certain biblical texts refer to the prophets as watchmen (Jeremiah 6:17; Ezekiel 3:17; 33:7). Since the previous verse in our text speaks of the beautiful feet of the messengers, the verse at hand may have prophets-as-watchmen in mind. In that case, a prospective change in the prophets' message would be in view. Instead of earlier prophets' messages of warning—criticisms that fell mostly on deaf ears—the prophets would lead with news of celebrations in the new era of redemption. The prophets (watchmen) take up the message and sing together to the glory of God (Isa. 44:23). But they not only hear what God has done; they also see it happening!

2. Who are the watchmen and what are their duties? (Isaiah 52:8)

When the works of the Lord are recognized as such, there should be an appropriate response. Regarding the *ruins* of Jerusalem, Isaiah 35:1–2 is similar. The singing was to be done not just by the people, but by desolated Jerusalem itself. The prophet Isaiah mentions these *ruins* also in Isaiah 51:3 and 61:4, along with the parallel terms “deserts,” “wastelands,” “devastated” (twice), and “ruined cities.” The rebuilding and repopulation of Jerusalem would turn the city into a place of celebration as the memory of God's saving work would come to the

people's minds.

About 140 years would elapse between the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the rebuilding of the city's walls in about 445 B.C. When that event came to pass, the people did indeed celebrate with singing in a grandiose ceremony (Nehemiah 12:27–43).

3. How would the exiled Israelites respond to God's miraculous works? (Isaiah 52:9)

What Do You Think?

In addition to singing, what are some ways you express joy in your salvation? How can you tell the world what God has done in your life?

Digging Deeper

What "ruins" in your life (or others' lives) can benefit from a renewed proclamation of joy?

The salvation of God is illustrated by the Lord making *bare His holy arm* (rolling up His sleeves) in order to deliver His people before the nations of all the earth.

The phrases *in the sight of all the nations and all the ends of the earth will see* might cause us to wonder how widespread the knowledge of Israel's experience of deliverance could have been in the sixth century B.C. Jewish enclaves (districts) existed in various parts of the Babylonian Empire and in Egypt, and they could have spread news. Since Phoenician colonies existed around the Mediterranean, stories had a way of making the rounds via their trading routes (compare 1 Kings 10:6–7).

Even so, the fulfillment of this promise was generations into the future. As in the previous verse, the prophet was less concerned with a timeline than he was regarding the final outcome and the people's response to it. Further, the imagery may also be intended as a type (depiction) of the deliverance we have in Christ, since we are to take the gospel of deliverance from sin to "all nations" (Matthew 28:19–20).

4. How did Isaiah communicate God's authority to the Israelites? (Isaiah 52:10)

What Do You Think?

What circumstances prevent you from expressing concern for the salvation of the whole world?

Digging Deeper

What help do you need from God to overcome these circumstances and proclaim His salvation?

A Call for a New Exodus: Isaiah 52:11-12

It was also time for the people to clean up (v. 11). As the Exiles left Babylon, they were not to defile themselves but be clean and carry the holy vessels back to Zion.

The book of Leviticus, particularly chapters 11 and 13–15, specifies numerous unclean things that the Israelites were to avoid. Contact with such things rendered a person temporarily unable to participate in temple worship (2 Chronicles 23:19). Since the people would carry the temple vessels back to Jerusalem (Ezra 5:13–14; 7:19; 8:25–30), they needed to avoid anything other than absolute respect for those objects and the uses to which they would be put. The kings of Babylon had used these items for unholy purposes (1:7; Daniel 1:2; 5:1–4, 23), and that practice dare not be repeated. Paul's own reference to uncleanness points mainly to anything connected to idolatry, as does the wider context of today's passage in Isaiah.

The connection between verse 1 (not in today's text) and verse 11 forms a complete idea: the people, the objects, and the entire city will become fit for the proper worship of God in a rebuilt temple.

5. What did Isaiah say was required of the exiles as they departed from captivity? (Isaiah 52:11)

What Do You Think?

What practices help you pursue purity from sin?

Digging Deeper

How will you strike a balance between remaining spiritually pure and actively witnessing to a sinful world (James 1:27)?

The second exodus here promised contains both a departure from the past first exodus and a continuity with it. Before, the Israelites ate their food in *haste* because they needed to leave Egypt quickly (see Exodus 12:11). However, whereas the first exodus happened under the continued threat of a cruel ruler, the second exodus was to need no such vigilance, because the Babylonian Empire had collapsed. No hasty flight would be necessary. Careful planning could occur, and the departure would take place when all was ready.

Both cases, however, witness to God's protection. The phrase *the Lord will go before you* is reflected in Exodus 13:21; the idea of a supernatural *rear guard* is seen in Exodus 14:19. Although the second exodus predicted by Isaiah would not be endangered by a pursuing army as the first one was, the returnees would still need divine protection (Ezra 8:21–23).

God's ultimate future for those devoted to Him was to come about because of the work of the suffering servant, described in the three verses immediately after the verse before us (Isaiah 52:13–15). Relief for God's suffering people of the sixth century B.C. foreshadowed the ultimate and eternal relief from suffering by that servant—Jesus Christ!

6. What are the differences and the similarities of these first and second exodus? (Isaiah 52:12)

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Celebrate the bearers of good news (Isaiah 52:7).
2. Receive the good news (v. 8).
3. Make a joyful noise unto the Lord (v. 9).
4. God protects His children (v. 10).
5. Christians should avoid unholy things (v. 11).
6. We must trust God in all things (v. 12).

CONCLUSION

Isaiah 52 Back Then

The prophetic poetry of Isaiah 40–55 has come a long way by the time we get to Isaiah 52. The section began with a distraught, heartbroken people living in a foreign land, subject to the whims of foreign rulers. They had given up hope in God's care for them since their ancestors' sins had brought an ongoing catastrophe upon them. But at the point of today's Scripture, they stood on the verge of a new and bright future. For the ancient audience of Isaiah 52, the call to return home involved a literal, physical movement from Babylonia to the land of Israel, more than 1,000 miles away. Yet the more important movement was not that of a four-month journey across the land, but that of an interior journey of faith, in mind and spirit.

The greatest enemy of faith is often traced to a loss of hope. This week's text called on the people of Israel to reclaim their hope so that they could act in faith toward the God who sought their trust, their obedience, and their love. The temptation to despair undoubtedly remained strong, and that is not something one can simply will away. But by refreshing memories of God's saving actions of the past, Isaiah's prophetic vision of the future could be believed and acted on. A renewed realization of God's presence is always in order!

But several things had to happen for that realization to take root. These included (1) affirming the value of the messengers; (2) trusting those messengers to do their jobs in speaking truth; (3) accepting the opportunity to transform ruins, both physical and spiritual, into places of rejoicing; and (4) reintroducing of worship as God desires. All these foundational elements became reality as God set forth His plan of rescue. As such, the text

takes a full-orbed view of the return (the new exodus), considering the actions and attitudes of all parties involved. Such a wide lens repeats the picture that appears in Isaiah 40, the opening of the “comfort section” of the book.

Isaiah 52 for Today

There can be no greater calling than that of bearing God’s words of hope to people who are seemingly without hope. That is true whether we are talking about the sixth century B.C or the twenty-first century A.D. And just as the announcement of rescue to the ancient Israelites was to result in rejoicing, so also for us. The good news of God’s saving work should always create a climate of gratitude, joy, desire to share the news, and generous acceptance of all who receive it.

Because God was in the picture, all was not lost for the Jews in Babylonian exile. The same is true today for those exiled spiritually in sin, enemies of God. Today’s gospel messengers—all Christians—are to join God’s work in spreading that message of eternal rescue (Matthew 28:19–20). The courage and faith required of the ancient Israelite is our must-have as well. Let us celebrate the good ways in which God can use us as His vessels to transform the lives of those around us.

PRAYER

O God, who calls us to faith, empower us to leave the comfortable and familiar for places You would have the message of Your Son spread. We pray in the name of that Son, Jesus. Amen!

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Don’t just celebrate the good news of the gospel—be its messenger!