

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations enquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

(Isaiah 11:1–10)

Introduction

There are three major holidays around which—every year, without fail—you can count on articles appearing from opposing Christian perspectives. Many are strongly in favour of celebrating these holidays and defend their position fervently. Others are strongly opposed and defend their position with equal fervour. The holidays that I am referencing are Easter, Halloween, and Christmas.

For many readers—particularly those from a more fundamentalist Christian background—two things will stand out as odd about that opening paragraph.

First, many will find it strange that I mention Halloween in the same breath as Easter and Christmas. Many do not realise that Christian defenders of Halloween claim Christian, rather than pagan, roots for the holiday. While many consider Halloween to be nothing

more than a celebration of the occult, there are a great many Christians who wish to reclaim Halloween as a Christian celebration.

But it is the second surprising thing about the opening paragraph that is more pertinent to the study at hand. Many will be surprised that there is any real Christian objection to the celebration of Easter and Christmas. Unlike Halloween, these holidays are celebrations of clear, biblical events. Why would anyone object to Christians observing these days?

But make no mistake: There are Christians opposed to these holidays, and some vociferously so. Consider the following words from one Christian website, which fervently opposes the celebration of Christmas. Speaking of Christians who celebrate Christmas, the article reads: “Many are doing so, heedless of the severe warnings in Scripture of what their eternal fate and destiny will be if they continue to embrace this ancient custom.” According to that article, you must make “the right decision” and reject Christmas if you want to “inherit eternal life, and reign with the saints forever.”

To be fair, that particular website is on the lunatic fringe of Christmas and Easter rejecters. But there are many others who take a more tempered approach while still rejecting the celebration of Christmas and Easter.

Christians who oppose these celebrations point out—correctly—that the Bible nowhere tells us to observe these events on an annual basis. While the resurrection is celebrated every Sunday, the concept of an annual celebration of the event is foreign to Scripture they argue. The Bible doesn’t even hint at the need for Christians to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

But opponents of the holidays have further ammunition: These holidays—or so they claim—have pagan, rather than Christian, roots. The particular days on which both events are celebrated were recognised as pagan holidays long before they were adopted as Christian celebrations. Or so they claim.

If you have followed the recent Ancient Christmas series on posts on the church website, you will be familiar with the arguments against a Christian celebration of Christmas. Critics argue that Jesus could not have been born on 25 December, but others point out that a late December date is not entirely implausible. Critics insist that the date was actually recognised as at least two pagan holidays—Saturnalia and Sol Invictus—even before Jesus was born. Others insist that that doesn’t matter—that Christmas has so successfully supplanted other pagan celebrations that there is no danger of confusing the two. Objectors also decry the various customs that accompany Christmas: gift-giving, the Christmas tree, Santa Claus, etc. All of these things, they argue, are rooted in paganism and are therefore forbidden for Christians.

Truth be told, the debate is very academic and largely pointless. While 25 December was recognised in writing as the day of the Lord's birth from as early as 202 AD (by St. Hippolytus in his *Commentary on Daniel*), the Bible doesn't actually tell us when he was born. However, the Christmas event—the incarnation of the Son of God—has deep, biblical roots. We can easily become sidetracked by pointless discussions and, in it all, miss the glory of the incarnation.

It would be a great thing one year to have a series of sermons leading up to Christmas on Old Testament prophecies of the incarnation. We don't have time to do that in a single study, but we do have time to consider one such prophecy – specifically, the prophecy of the branch, as it is recorded in Isaiah 11:1-10.

By the time Isaiah was born, the once-united nation of Israel had long been divided into two: Judah in the South with Jerusalem as its capital, and Israel in the north with Samaria as its capital. Isaiah ministered in the south to the nation of Judah. Ancient tradition holds that Isaiah's father, Amoz, was the brother of Judean King Amaziah, so that Isaiah himself was of royal descent. This may explain the seeming ease of access he had to the throne.

Isaiah ministered during the reigns of four Judean kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The prophecy of chapter 11 seems to have been given during the reign of Ahaz.

Ahaz was a godless king, who showed no inclination to obey God's law. He followed the idolatrous example set by the Israelite kings and even offered his own son as a human sacrifice to false gods. He worshipped idols at every available opportunity (2 Kings 16:1-4), and when God did speak to him through Isaiah, instructing him to ask for a sign of divine favour, he feigned piety and refused to ask for a sign (7:10-12). He simply would not trust or submit to the Lord, regardless of whether the Lord spoke words of comfort or words of confrontation.

During Ahaz's reign, Israel formed a military coalition with Syria to attack Jerusalem. Rather than turning to the Lord for help, Ahaz formed a coalition of his own with Assyria. This displeased the Lord greatly, and he warned Ahaz time and again that the foolish alliance would not stand. Isaiah urged Ahaz to trust the Lord, but to no avail.

The Lord therefore warned Ahaz that, while he would permit Assyria to defeat the Israeli-Syrian coalition, he would ultimately turn Assyria against Judah (10:5-6). Assyria would be "the rod of" Yahweh's "anger" and "the staff in their hands" his "fury." Judah was "a godless nation" against whom the Lord would "send" Assyria—"the people of [his] wrath" against whom he would "command" the Assyrians "to take spoil and seize and plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets."

Assyria, however, would not recognise the Lord's hand in the victory they would achieve. Rather than acknowledging itself to be the instrument of God's judgement, it would boast in its own prowess and ability to destroy Jerusalem, as it had previously done to Samaria (10:7–11). Therefore, when the Lord's anger against Judah was satiated, he would turn on Assyria (10:12–19). Though Assyria intended to completely annihilate Judah, God would not allow that to happen. Instead, after he had dealt with Assyria, he would bring a remnant of Judah back to the Promised Land (10:20–27).

In 10:28–34, Isaiah poetically describes Assyria's slow march toward Jerusalem. Recognising the threat, the Judeans would tremble in terror, anticipating utter destruction. Assyria would be far too powerful to escape. But suddenly, at the very last minute, Yahweh himself would step in to deal with the threat:

This very day he will halt at Nob; he will shake his fist at the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. Behold, the Lord GOD of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the Majestic One.

(Isaiah 10:32–34)

The threat would be removed. The once blossoming forest of Assyrian power would be completely levelled. All that would be left would be a decimated forest. Where once proud cedars stood would be only stumps. Charred grassland would replace a thriving forest ecosystem. It's a doleful scene. But it sets us up for a most glorious prophecy.

As the formerly glorious forest of Assyria, which had previously consumed Judah, lay charred and decimated, something would begin to stir. A small shoot would begin to flower and flourish. It would grow into a branch, which would ultimately turn into a fruit-bearing tree. Life would return where only death could be seen.

The branch was symbolic of a person: a servant of the Lord who would come to restore life to God's beleaguered people. As you look closely at the character of the branch, it is clear that no servant or the Lord could fulfil this prophecy but Jesus Christ. The text reveals four things about the branch, which point us to Messiah, the hope of Christmas.

The Branch's Ancestry

First, the servant of the Lord, portrayed symbolically as a branch, would have a specific ancestry: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit" (v. 1).

We know from the New Testament that Jesus Christ was a descendant of David, Jesse's son. The prophecy here is that the Saviour—the one who would restore fruitfulness to God's barren people—would be a descendant of David, and Jesus was precisely that. As Ortlund notes, "Isaiah is thinking of a little boy, born in obscurity more than 2,000 years ago now, with no status but lineage in a failed ancient dynasty. And he is the only one who can save us from ourselves."

The (at least) twofold significance of this prophecy—of Messiah's ancestry—at this point in history must not be missed.

First, it is significant because Judah was looking to foreign nations for deliverance. Ahaz had placed the nation's hope squarely on the shoulders of Assyria, but the Lord reminded him and his people that the ultimate deliverer would be one of their own: an Israelite, from the tribe of Judah, from the lineage of David.

Second, when many Jews were perhaps tempted to think that the Lord had completely forsaken them, he was reminding them that his promises remained firm. The first hint of Messiah's Davidic ancestry was given some three hundred years earlier, when God promised David's line a neverending throne (2 Samuel 7:12–13). All that seemed to be under threat in Ahaz's time, with Assyria constantly threatening to destroy Judah and dethrone their kings. About 150 years after this prophecy, Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, would indeed destroy Jerusalem and effectively put an end to the Davidic regency. God's promises, it seemed, were rapidly falling, but here he reminds them that he was still committed to his word: The ultimate deliverer would, indeed, come from David's line.

Christmas is about God keeping his promises. From the dawn of human history, when Adam and Eve first sinned, God promised that he would send a delivered to conquer sin and death. The promise of Christmas is the oldest promise in the Bible, and though it took four thousand years to come to pass, God was true to his word.

God is always true to his word, and Christmas is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on and celebrate divine faithfulness.

The Branch's Rule

Second, Isaiah highlights something about the nature of the branch's rule:

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide

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disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

(Isaiah 11:2–5)

It was not enough that the branch come from David's line, for Ahaz himself was from David's line. In fact, every king of Judah was of Davidic ancestry, and yet none proved capable to deliver God's people fully. The branch needed to be different.

What would make the branch different? What would set him apart from all the Davidic kings before him? "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him." Unlike the kings of Judah, or the kings of the surrounding nations to which Judah looked for deliverance, the branch would be empowered in his leadership, warfare, and holiness by God's Spirit. He would, says Geoffrey Grogan, "be perfectly endowed by the Spirit with everything requisite to his kingly task."

Isaiah employs three couplets—"wisdom and understanding," "counsel and might," and "knowledge and the fear of the LORD"—to describe the power of the Spirit manifested in the ministry of the branch. Each of those couplets has an outworking in vv. 3–5.

First, "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding" means "he shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (vv. 3–4). This refers to the branch's leadership. The branch would be a leader who would deliver what God intended a leader to deliver. He would give God's people the peace that a king ought to give his people.

When we think of judgement, as the language here highlights, we tend to think in negative terms. But we need to look to the language of Scripture to understand in what sense judgement language is being used. The recipients of the judgement here are "the poor" and "the meek." When language of judgement in the Bible is applied to the poor and meek, it speaks of salvation (see Psalm 72:1–2; 82:1–4). The idea here, then, is that the branch would have the God-given, Spirit-empowered ability to provide salvation to those who needed salvation.

Jesus Christ came as a Saviour. By the power of God's Spirit, he was able to do everything that needed to be done to save his people from their sins. If you feel the weight of sin on your shoulder and are looking to someone to deliver you from it, there is only one person

who was empowered by the Spirit to do so: Jesus Christ, the branch whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

Second, “the Spirit of counsel and might” means that “he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked” (v. 4). Not only would the branch provide salvation for those who recognised their need for salvation, but he would come as a judge to those who resisted him.

Jesus Christ, the baby in the manger whom we celebrate at Christmas, certainly came as a Saviour to those who would receive him (Luke 2:11), but he also came as a judge to those who would resist him. Jesus has authority to grant eternal life to those who receive him and to deal eternal destruction to those who resist him. The branch is coming back to earth one day, but not as a baby in a manger. He is coming back as the righteous judge of all to give his people eternal life and to punish his enemies with eternal punishment.

Third, “the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” means that “righteousness shall be the belt of his waist and faithfulness the belt of his loins” (v. 5). Whether he saves the repentant or judges the unrepentant, the branch does so in complete righteousness. Repentant sinners are saved as his righteousness is credited to their account through faith in him. Unrepentant sinners will be eternally punished as a righteous act of divine justice. In every way, the branch behaves righteously. Of him it can truly be said that “his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord” (v. 3).

This kind of Spirit-empowered rule was vital for God’s people in Isaiah’s time. They sorely lacked godly leadership, effective warfare, and holy justice. The Davidic kings that God gave to Judah were meant to provide these things, but they all failed – Ahaz prime among them. But the Lord would not allow failure to win; the branch would provide what Judah’s kings could not.

This is the promise of Christmas: that God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, as Saviour and Judge of the world. Those who believe in him can be saved from their sins; those who resist him till death will be judged for their sins. What will you do with the baby in the manger?

The Branch’s World

Judah knew only warfare and terror, but the branch would bring an entirely different world:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

(Isaiah 11:6–9)

The branch would come with divine authority to restore creation to the way God intended it to be. As you read of wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, and calf and lion coexisting peacefully, you are struck with unmistakable visions of Eden. Isaiah wants us to imagine a world in which children can play fearlessly with wild animals and where no more bloodshed exists. He prophesies a world in which “they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.”

This is a glorious vision. It's an existence for which the world longs. But only one person can provide it. And how will it come about? Only as “the earth [is] full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” The branch would bring with him knowledge of the Lord that would ultimately spread across the earth.

Notice that the branch is interested in all creation. Listen to Ortlund again: “The triumph of Jesus will not be ... private bliss.... The victory of Jesus will be the awakening and purifying and restoring and gladdening of all things human. His kingdom is the only final answer to poverty, hunger, injustice, illiteracy, and all other sorrows we have created.” Isaiah pictures a day in which the gospel will so conquer, in which so many people will have bowed the knee to Jesus Christ, that peace will actually exist on earth.

But notice that Isaiah is not interested in when, but in who. He does not tell us to look for signs of the time, to speculate when such overwhelming peace will cover the earth, but to recognise the one through whom such peace will be realised. Our focus must not be on the signs of peace but on the bringer of peace. He wants us to marvel in the beauty of the branch more than in the results of the branch's Spirit-empowered ministry.

The Branch's Reach

Fourth, we learn from Isaiah something about the branch's reach: “In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for all the peoples – of him shall the nations enquire, and his resting place shall be glorious” (v. 10).

The promised branch would not be Israel's deliverer alone, but would stand as deliverer “for all the peoples.” Anyone – Jew or Gentile – who trusts in him can experience God's

gracious salvation. And anyone who rejects him will experience God's righteous judgement.

But notice the progression of the text before us.

It begins with a single little sprout in a decimated forest. It doesn't look like much. And the arrival of Jesus didn't look like much.

Do you realise how insignificant the arrival of Jesus seemed at the first Christmas?

Jesus' coming was *geographically* insignificant. He was born in Bethlehem, a town of no real significance in New Testament Israel. It is estimated that Bethlehem had a population of perhaps three hundred when Jesus was born. Even Micah recognised that Bethlehem was "too little to be among the clans of Judah" (Micah 5:2). Not only was he born in Bethlehem, but he was born among the animals and laid in a manger—hardly a fitting place for a king!

Born in Bethlehem, Jesus was raised in Nazareth, a province so despised that it was commonly held by Jews of the day that nothing good could come from Nazareth (John 1:46).

Jesus' arrival was *financially* insignificant. He was born, not to royalty—even though he was of royal lineage—but to a poor carpenter and his betrothed. In Leviticus 12, God prescribed sacrifices that parents were required to bring at the birth of their firstborn. The required sacrifice depended on the wealth of the parents, and the most meagre sacrifice, for the poorest of families, was "two turtledoves or two pigeons" (v. 8). This is what Joseph and Mary brought as a sacrifice at Jesus' dedication (Luke 2:24), which indicates the level of poverty into which Jesus was born.

Jesus' arrival was *morally* insignificant—or, at least, it was perceived to be so. How many people believed that Jesus was born of a virgin? We know that Jesus' enemies did not believe that he was conceived in a virgin's womb (John 8:41), and even his fellow Nazarenes rejected his birth narrative (Mark 6:1–6). Even his own brothers seem to have been sceptical (John 7:5). But, actually, there is a hint even in his birth narrative that his relatives disbelieved Joseph and Mary's story.

There is an interesting note in Luke 2:7 that Jesus was laid in a manger "because there was no place for them in the inn." The word translated "inn" properly means "guest room," and the two other times it is used in the New Testament it is translated that way (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11; see Luke 2:7 in the CSB). There is another Greek word entirely that is used of a public inn (see Luke 10:34). Bethlehem, a town of three hundred, was unlikely to

have had a commercial inn, and Joseph and Mary, who were from Bethlehem, would have sought housing with family. Why do you suppose “there was no place” for them in the family guest room? Is it perhaps because nobody believed their story? They wouldn’t allow the scandal of an illegitimate birth to take place under their roof! Joseph and Mary could spend the night with the animals!

Jesus’ arrival was *culturally* insignificant. He didn’t make any big splashes. He was not frontpage news during his boyhood. In fact, there is but a single narrative of his life between the ages of two and twelve, and then nothing more until he turned thirty. He quietly went about the business for which the Father had sent him.

In short, the image of a tiny little shoot in a decimated forest is perfectly appropriate for the coming of Messiah. But while that coming was geographically, financially, morally, and culturally insignificant, it was of ultimate eternal significance. The “shoot from the stump of Jesse” ultimately became “a signal for all peoples” (v. 10).

The word “signal” speaks of a flag or a banner that is lifted up as a rallying point for a particular people. During the American-British War of 1812, Dr. William Beanes was captured by the British in Baltimore. An attorney friend, Francis Scott Key, went to Baltimore to negotiate his release. He found the ship where Beanes was being held captive and boarded to begin negotiations. While the negotiations were successful, the two men were not permitted to leave the ship until the British finished bombarding Fort McHenry. Key watched the bombing campaign unfold from the safety of the ship. A day later, the British gave up, after failing to destroy the fort. Key was relieved to see that an American flag still flew after a full day’s bombing. He quickly penned a poem titled “The Defence of Fort McHenry,” which included these words:

And the rocket’s red glare,
the bombs bursting in air,
gave proof through the night
that our flag was still there.

The poem was eventually set to music and popularly became known as “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In 1931 it was adopted as the American national anthem. That flying American flag served as a symbolic rallying point for the American people as the war raged on. According to our text, the branch would similarly “stand as a signal” around which all nations could rally.

When did the branch—Jesus Christ, the Messiah—“stand as a signal” for all peoples? Jesus himself picked up on this imagery in the New Testament when he said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” According to John, “he said this

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to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (John 12:32–33). When Jesus was raised on the cross, taking upon himself the sins of those for whom he died, he stood as a signal for all peoples. He died on that cross and rose three days later, proving that his sacrifice for sin was accepted. Today, anyone who looks to the crucified and risen Saviour in repentance and faith can find salvation in him, for “the shoot from the stump of Jesse” indeed came to earth and lived and died and rose again to “bear fruit” for “all the peoples.”

AMEN