THE MESSIAH’S REIGN OF PEACE

Isaiah 11:1–9

Key Verse: 11:6

“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.”

Merry Christmas! Today we start the Advent season of 2020. “Advent” in Latin means “coming,” and it’s the season when Christians celebrate the coming of Jesus to this world. It also points to his Second Coming someday. What does his coming mean to us? Historically, during the four weeks of Advent the church has emphasized four main themes: peace, joy, hope and love. We often don’t find these things in our world, or even in our own lives. In every place and generation these four things—peace, joy, hope and love—are what people desperately need. For the next three weeks we’ll be studying some of the prophecies of Isaiah that point to the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. Chapters 11, 35 and 40 are very famous, well-loved by believers everywhere, because they tell of the peace, joy and hope all people can find in Jesus. This week we’ll be thinking about his peace, looking at Isaiah 11:1–9. These verses describe a vision of what kind of leader the Messiah is, and the effects his reign can have on all people. Through this study may we come to know Jesus better, and this Christmas may his peace truly fill our souls and give us God’s hope.

To understand the Book of Isaiah, we first should briefly review the historical context. But it’s not easy, because prophecy usually isn’t written in chronological order. About three hundred years before Isaiah’s time, King David united the twelve tribes of Israel into one nation (cf. 2Sa5:3,4). After about a hundred years it was divided into two nations, Northern Israel and Judah (cf. 1Ki12:16–20). Each nation had its own king and capital city. Now another 200 years had passed. Northern Israel had been ruled by King Jeroboam for 41 years (2Ki14:23), and Judah, by King Uzziah for 52 years (2Ch26:1–3). So roughly, the years 800–750 BC marked a long time of peace and prosperity for both nations. But the people of Northern Israel interpreted this as God’s approval to let them do whatever they wanted. They resorted to all kinds of idolatry that God had strongly warned them against. The prophets Amos and Hosea also lived at this time and warned Northern Israel to turn back to God or face his severe judgment. The people of Judah were lulled into this same spiritual complacency. So God brought the empire of Assyria to invade and punish both nations. The Assyrian Empire was in modern-day Iraq. In 722 BC it would finally destroy Northern Israel completely, and the ten tribes of Israel that had lived there would become known as the ten lost tribes.

In these dark times God called Isaiah to be his servant (Isa6). Isaiah prophesied for over 60 years during the reigns of four kings of Judah (Isa1:1), starting in the 740s BC and ending around 690 BC. He’s known as one of the major prophets of the Old Testament, and among all its books his writing has the most advanced Hebrew vocabulary and the most vivid prophecies of the Messiah. After Isaiah’s calling, chapter 7 describes the reign of Ahaz of Judah. It was the year 735 BC. Ahaz was born in the direct line of King David. But unlike David, he was fearful. He worshiped all kinds of idols and even offered his own children in the fire. When he heard that Northern Israel and the Arameans were plotting to invade, he desperately reached out to the Assyrian Empire to protect him, and he even gave them the gold and silver from the temple and palace treasuries (2Ki16:7–9). Under his reign, his people’s hearts were “moved,” in a bad way, “as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind” (Isa7:2). Ahaz became so fearful he refused to listen to God through his servant Isaiah (7:10–13). When he died in 710 BC, he wasn’t even buried in the tombs of the kings (2Ch28:27). His fear and idolatry brought devastation to Judah through the Assyrian invasion, which eventually happened in 700 BC (7:17–25; 8:5–8). It would leave Judah like a cut down tree, and finally, a burned stump (6:13).

In the Old Testament the books of 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles carefully record the history all the kings of Northern Israel and Judah. That’s a total of six books of the Bible dedicated to this topic. Why is this lineage of Israel’s kings so important? Mainly it’s because of the promise God made to David. God promised him that one day his offspring would succeed him as king and establish an everlasting kingdom (2Sa7:12,13). David was known as Israel’s greatest king, a man after God’s own heart (1Sa13:14; Ac13:22), not only a great fighter but also a shepherd, poet, musician, God-lover and friend of many. But even David committed gross sins of adultery and murder and brought pain and division to his people. His son Solomon built the Jerusalem temple and brought the nation much glory and wealth. But he, too, was a huge disappointment due to his immorality and idolatry. But the king God promised to send from David’s offspring would be known as the Messiah, the Anointed One. He would be known as “Immanuel”—God with us (Isa7:14; 8:8,10). This offspring of David would be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6,7). What a great hope his coming to this world is for all God’s people! Ahaz was one of David’s offspring, but he was nowhere near to being the promised One. Still, God didn’t give up hope. God would fulfill all his promises.

In chapters 9 and 10 God promised to preserve a remnant of his people but punish Northern Israel and Assyria with great devastation and humiliation. It would be a very dark time. But even in the darkest time God’s hope isn’t diminished; it shines even brighter. In 11:1–9 Isaiah turns to a glorious vision God gave him of the coming of the Messiah. Verses 1–5 describe the Messiah himself, and verses 6–9, the effect of his reign.

Let’s read verse 1. Here the Messiah is described as a “shoot” and a “branch” that will “bear fruit.” The “stump of Jesse” refers to David’s father Jesse (1Sa16), and thus, to the royal dynasty of David. Why does Isaiah use the word “stump”? It’s connected to a tree being chopped down. God would chop down the nation, and especially David’s dynasty, through devastating acts of judgment due to his people’s sins. But just as a burned tree stump in the ground can look so hopeless, such a stump eventually can produce a “tender shoot” (cf. 27:6; 53:2). This shoot can look weak and vulnerable, but by God’s power it can grow into a new, fruit-bearing branch. Isaiah has already mentioned this “branch” in 4:2: “In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors in Israel.” So this “branch” is another of Isaiah’s descriptions of the Messiah. It’s repeated in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Zechariah (Jer23:5; 33:15; Zech3:8; 6:12). It’s the reason Jesus called himself, among other things, “the true vine” (Jn15:1ff.) And this image appears again in the Book of Revelation when he says, “I am the root and the descendant of David” (Rev22:16; cf. Rev5:5). This imagery teaches us that just as we have to wait for a new branch to grow and bear fruit, so we have to wait patiently for God to fulfill his promise to send the Messiah. Waiting on the Lord is a major theme of the Book of Isaiah (Isa8:17; 25:9; 26:8; 30:18; 33:2; 40:31; 49:23; 51:5; 64:4).

Read verse 2. The Spirit’s coming on the Messiah is another repeated theme in Isaiah (42:1; 61:1). It’s also described in the Gospels at the beginning of Jesus’ Messianic ministry (Mt3:16; Jn1:32,33; esp. Lk4:18,19). Many of Judah’s kings did not have the Spirit of the Lord, even though they were David’s descendants; many were arrogant, cowardly and spiritually bankrupt. It tells us that we may have some natural talents or life experiences that can make us relatively good leaders. But even our best talents and experiences have grave limitations. Only someone anointed by God’s Spirit is truly equipped to lead God’s people and bring them God’s salvation. Here God’s Spirit is described as “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” He would fill the Messiah with God’s wisdom, understanding and power to do his work. He would enable the Messiah to bring people real knowledge and awesome respect for God himself. The Spirit would not only lead and comfort him but also give him the power and insight to resist temptation and do exactly what God wanted (Lk4:1–13; Jn7:24; 14:31).

How would the Spirit’s resting on him affect his ministry practically? Read verses 3,4. This emphasizes his spiritual discernment and judgment. Many people get caught up in appearances and enamored by people’s wealth, status and achievements. But the Messiah, inspired by the Spirit, would focus on “the poor” and “the meek of the earth.” They are helpless people and outcasts who are so easily despised and ignored. Many kings in history have oppressed and used them. But inspired by the Spirit, the Messiah will bring them righteous judgment and “equity.” In verse 4b the author uses fierce language to emphasize the uncompromising courage of the Messiah and to illustrate the sheer power of his words, which are like a sharp, double-edged sword (Heb4:12; Rev1:16b; 19:15). Many leaders talk on and on and either irritate people or put them to sleep, but the power of the Messiah’s words would effect God’s judgment on earth. Read verse 5. The waist and the loins represent his core. “Righteousness” and “faithfulness” are God’s core characteristics (Ps40:11; Zech8:8). Many of Israel’s kings were unrighteous and unfaithful, in greater or lesser degrees. But at his core the Messiah is completely righteous and faithful because he’s filled with God’s Spirit. He has real integrity and dependability that all people everywhere can trust. With our Messiah Jesus ruling, people can be truly blessed.

What Isaiah is leading up to in this vision is the effect of the Messiah’s reign. What is it? Read verses 6–9. The main thing implied in these poetic verses is peace. The animals here are natural enemies. Wolves instinctively eat lambs, leopards eat young goats, and lions eat calves. So lambs, young goats and calves run away from them, and wolves, leopards and lions chase them. But under the Messiah’s reign they all shall “lie down,” meaning they’ll find rest and peace. Isaiah has already emphasized the peace the Messiah would bring (9:6,7). Later he also mentions inner peace (26:3; 32:17) and peace with God (27:5). Here he especially describes peace among people who were formerly hostile. So we also have in these verses cows and bears and children and snakes. What they really do is harm each other. But under the Messiah’s reign there will be no more hurting or destroying. There will be real peace and rest and security. What’s the source of this peace? Isaiah 52:7 reads, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” The Messiah brings peace because he brings God’s reign into people’s hearts and lives. Under his gracious reign, people can forgive each other. Under his gracious reign, people can feel fully satisfied and secure.

But the cold reality is, our world is full of conflict, and it always seems to be so. Recently there’s been war in Ethiopia in the Tigray Region, war in Turkey with the Kurds, war in Northern Africa, especially in Libya, war in Yemen, war in Syria, war between Israel and Palestine and Iran, war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, war in Iraq and Afghanistan, war against the Rohingyas in Myanmar, against the Uyghurs in China, and against the Papuans in New Guinea. There’s been a great war for leadership in Belarus and in Venezuela, and a hidden struggle for leadership in Saudi Arabia and Russia. Then we have the persistent and intense culture war in our own country, pitting those on the right and left against each other. The “Me Too” movement and “Black Lives Matter” are part of a struggle for justice and equity our society is still grappling with. Even within churches and families people can have completely broken relationships that can seem impossible to repair. There’s so much conflict in our world, the Bible tells us, mainly because people are full of sin. Sin hardens our hearts, makes us proud, selfish and cruel, and gradually ruins all our relationships one by one.

But Jesus our Messiah brings peace because, according to verse 9, he helps people to really know God personally. Knowing God is not knowing mere information about him; it especially means experiencing his grace of forgiveness of sins personally (Jer31:34). God’s grace of forgiveness through Jesus our Messiah brings peace to our souls, peace with God (Ro5:1), and peace with one another. Ephesians 2:14–19 tells us how: “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” Only in Jesus can vastly different people have real peace with each other, all around the world, here at home, and in our personal lives.

This Christmas let’s open our hearts to our Messiah Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who came to rule our souls with the peace of God. May he help us experience his forgiving grace and show his grace especially making peace with those in our lives with whom we may have conflict. May the hope of his reign in God’s kingdom fill each and every one of us this holiday season, and may he use us to bring God’s peace to this dark world.