

Advent: “Between Two Homes”

Hoping For a Future Deliverer – Part 2

Isaiah 11:3-5

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³ 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, ⁴ 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. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. Isaiah 11:3–5 (ESV)

“You take care of your character, and let God take care of your reputation.” A wise old woman (who thought I was the greatest preacher ever!) shared those words with me while I was being considered for and interviewed at my first church for the position of Senior Pastor, and I’ve never forgotten that statement. She shared that statement with me because my candidacy at the church was not without a fair amount of controversy and tension. The church was deciding what direction it should go, and I was the focal point of that conversation.

I have a Bible in my office whose margins are filled with personal notes that I wrote during that season. It was not easy. There was a small group of people who were saying things that were unfair, hurtful, and untrue. I’d walk down the hallways, and conversations would suddenly change. It was hard to come to church, difficult to preach, and very challenging not to react.

The whole thing felt out of control, and I was powerless to really do anything about it. Thus the statement: “You take care of your character, and let God take care of your reputation.” Over a three-month period I found myself having to anchor my heart to God’s ability to take care of me, defend me, and I learned to trust Him for my deliverance. I tried to live in 1 Peter 2:23 – “he continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” But it was not easy. Some days my trust in the Lord was strong, and other days I was filled with fear. It was a battle – a fight to believe that God could be trusted with my reputation.

Eventually the church worked through the process of calling me as the Senior Pastor, and we all learned a lot through the process. God used it to refine all of us. And the lesson for me, one that I’m still learning, was how to trust in God when the pressure around me and in me was enormous. I learned to look at the promises God kept and the promises that He made about the future in order to strengthen my wavering faith. I learned to derive spiritual strength from the past and future promises of God in the Scriptures.

Promises in the Midst of Tension

During this Advent season, we are spending three weeks examining Isaiah 11:1-10 and its relevance for the Christmas season and our lives. In case you were not here last week, or if you need a refresher, let me set the stage for the background of this text. The prophet Isaiah lived approximately 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, during a time when the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms – Israel to the north and Judah to the south. The focus of Isaiah’s ministry was to call the people of Judah to repent from their cultural godlessness and to renew their trust in Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Isaiah’s message was particularly targeted to the kings who led the people of Judah, because the behavior of the kings had a direct effect on the spiritual culture of the people. When good kings ruled, the people followed God, but when bad kings ruled, the people rebelled. If the king trusted in God, the people would too. If the king failed to trust in God, the people followed suit.

Ahaz was the king behind the message of Isaiah 11. He was in a political pressure cooker, as Israel and Syria were pressuring him to join an alliance against the ruthless superpower Assyria as he was facing national security threats in the south. Ahaz was considering becoming a vassal state of Assyria, and Isaiah was preaching to Ahaz that he needed to put his trust in the Lord.

As a part of Isaiah’s message, he told Ahaz about the promised Messiah. In Isaiah 7 he said that *“a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”* (Isaiah 7:14). In Isaiah 9 he said that *“the government shall be upon his shoulders and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6). Isaiah wanted Ahaz to know that God’s people will prevail in the end, and that he could trust God even now.

Last week we studied verses 1-2, and we learned that God promised to bring restoration to his people even after discipline or what we called “stumpville.” Verse 1 promised a shoot that would emerge from the stump of Jesse, and verse 2 promised that this ruler would be anointed with divine power – *“The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him”* Isaiah 1:2 (ESV).

We also saw the wonderful connections of Isaiah 11 to the life and ministry of Jesus. He was the ultimate fulfillment of the Messianic promise, and His life was characterized by the empowerment of the Spirit. Since we live after His first coming, we have the unique advantage of being able to look back and see how God kept His promise.

But for the people of Judah and Ahaz, the promise of a coming deliverer was given to them in order to strengthen their faith in the midst of crisis. The pressure, fear, and stress were enormous, and Isaiah called them to trust in the Lord. They were called to *“ . . . wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him”* Isaiah 8:17 (ESV).

Let’s look at verses 3-5 and see what we can learn about hope that comes from a promised deliverer. What do we learn about the Messiah, how should that have helped the people of Judah, and how should it help all of us in the midst of challenging, fearful, or unfair seasons of life?

1. What the Messiah Loves (v. 3a)

Verse 3 is really a summary or a conclusion of what was said in verse 2 about the Messiah's empowerment by the Spirit. He was going to have the Spirit of Yahweh (LORD) rest upon him, which meant that there would be a connection between his actions and God's will. He was going to embody the law of God on the earth.

Back in Deuteronomy 18, Moses told the people of Israel that this kind of prophet was coming:

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen...¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. Deuteronomy 18:15-18 (ESV)

The Messiah would be characterized by divine wisdom and understanding, by divine counsel and might, and by divine knowledge and the fear of the Lord. These qualities are all things that will characterize the Messiah because of God's empowerment. But there is more.

Verse 3 identifies that Messiah will delight in the fear of the Lord. The previous statements indicated that something was done **to** the Messiah. But this is in reference to what is happening **inside** the Messiah. It is not just that He will be empowered with the right things or even do the right things (which He will surely do!), but also His heart will be set on the right affection. In other words, the Messiah will love the right thing. The core of who He is will be right.

The phrase "fear of the Lord" is a very important concept in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Can you think with me of some places where this appears?

- Proverbs 1:7 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge
- Proverbs 2:5 links the fear of the Lord with the knowledge of God
- Psalm 19:9 uses the term as a synonym for the law of the Lord or the commands of God
- Act 9:31 describes the early church as "walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit"

There is great text in Deuteronomy that captures the depth and significance of what "fear the Lord" or "the fear of the Lord" meant in the Old Testament. In the context of giving the people the Ten Commandments, Moses challenged them to be genuine in their relationship with God:

¹² "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul..." Deuteronomy 10:12 (ESV)

If you were to do a search for the phrase "fear the Lord," you would see it used all over the Old Testament (I found 55 uses in my first search), and you would also find that it really is the preferred phrase that summarizes what it means to be a follower of the One True God. In the New Testament, we would use the term "Christian," but in the Old Testament it would be "God-fearer." To fear the Lord or to have the fear of the Lord is the essence of being a convert.

But notice that it is not only that the Messiah possesses this fear of the Lord, but also that He “delights” in it. The word for delight here is the same root word that is used to describe the way that God savors burnt offerings in Genesis 8:21. The sacrifice of Noah was pleasing to Him.

To savor good food or to say “Mmmm” is part of the idea here. But there is also a sense in which a desire for what is good serves as a powerful motivator. When I first came to College Park, and when the room was smaller, it amazed me how I could literally hear our congregation make the “Mmmm” sound over a great point in the text. I called it the College Park “Mmmm.” And it is not just a response. It also reflects and creates a motivation to come to worship. Good desires are powerful motivators. Keep this in mind because we will come back to it at the end.

The hope that is offered here to the people of Judah was that this Messiah was going to be like David in that He would have the right heart. The Messiah would love the right things, and they could rest in the hope that the driving force and passion in the Messiah would be a genuine and deep fear of the Lord. He would be a man after God’s own heart.

2) What the Messiah Will Do (v. 3b-4)

There is an important shift that happens in the second half of verse 3. Isaiah identifies what the Messiah will actually do. Previously we have heard about where He is going to come from, what is going to be upon Him, and what He is going to love. But now the focus is upon the kind of rule and effect He will have. What are the practical effects of the Messiah’s coming?

This starts with the negative or with what he will *not* do. Isaiah 11:3b tells us that the Messiah will not judge by what He sees or decide disputes by what He hears. Notice the courtroom language and the assumption of challenges or disputes being brought to Him. The issue of injustice is behind the scenes in all of this.

Eyes and ears are vital to the administration of justice because they are the only means of assessing the sides of a case. Sight and hearing are critical to the justice system. Touch, taste, and smell are not part of the dynamic here. A judge must use his eyes and his ears to evaluate the merits of a case. He or she has nothing else available, and yet these are flawed. There is no judge who sees everything clearly or who hears everything accurately. What’s more, what a judge is allowed to see or made to hear can be shaped by his or her bias or the manipulation of others. Even the best justice system rests on a frail foundation.

Some of you know what I am talking about on a level that is deeply personal. You have experienced the unfairness of a system at work or in education or in the courts or even in your family that was just fundamentally wrong. And the beauty of this text is that the Messiah is not like your boss, the school administration, the judge, or your parents. He is not like the people who have caused you great pain. And that is comforting at one level, but there is even more.

According to verse 4, the Messiah judges by righteousness and equity. The word “righteous” is another important word in the Old Testament. It is the signature word for that which is right, correct, and true. The word “equity” means that which is fair, upright, and just. This is how the

Messiah judges. Righteousness and equity is more than just what the Messiah brings. Righteousness and equity are the means by which he judges and decides. What eyes and ears are to earthly judges, righteousness and equity is to the Messiah.

Notice also who is mentioned in judgment: the poor and the meek. This is in reference to those who are being oppressed. A major theme in Isaiah is the way in which Judah is guilty of injustice. I'm sure that many of you have heard the phrase, "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow." But do you know to what sins Isaiah is referring?

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Isaiah 1:16–17 (ESV)

The point here is simply that God is going to be the deliverer of those who are oppressed. Judah had sinned by not taking this seriously, and when disciplinary oppression came to them, God would be the one who would ultimately deliver them. The Messiah is the hope of all who are oppressed. That's what Isaiah is saying.

What else will the Messiah do? He will not only judge fairly and relieve oppression, but He will also execute judgment. And this judgment is supremely powerful. Notice the description in the second half of verse 4. The Messiah will "*strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked*" (Isaiah 11:4). The image here is one of unbelievable power. After all, it is one thing to do some amazing feat or powerful act. But it is another to speak the action into reality. Think of the terror of a ruler who, by his words, can bring death.

The power of action by speaking is central to the demonstration of God's authority. What does Genesis 1 say as to how the world was created? "And God said, Let there be light . . ." (Gen 1:3). And what does Jesus do in John 11:43 at the tomb of Lazarus? He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." And he was raised from the dead. As we will see next month in Romans 8, the beauty and power of God's grace is to be declared righteous or to be justified (Romans 8:33-34a). How does the writer of Hebrews describe the Bible but as "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword . . . discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Finally, the image of the second coming has this word-power reality as a central part of its vision.

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. Revelation 19:11–16 (ESV)

So let's put all of this together and see what we have here in this image of the Messiah. He will love the right things and judge by righteousness, and He has the power to defeat His enemies. Here is a

ruler you can fully trust, one who brings true justice and who has the power to guarantee that it will happen.

If you are a war movie fan, you know that the cavalry and the air force have something in common. When they show up, everything changes. Soldiers rejoice and celebrate because a superior power has just entered the equation. The vision of the Messiah is like that but so much more. There is no one more trustworthy, just, and powerful. And this is the hope offered to Ahaz, to Jacob, and to all of us. No matter what the pressure or injustice, the Messiah will one day make it all right. You can bank your life on that!

3) Who the Messiah Is (v. 5)

The final thing that we see in this text is a statement regarding who the Messiah is or what He is all about. This is the last verse in this section about the Messiah, and it turns in verses 6-10 to a description of the realm in which He governs and leads. The pastoral residents are going to help you understand that passage next week.

Verse 5 tells us what is the essence of this Messiah, and it sounds like this:

⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins Isaiah 11:5 (ESV)

Obviously the summary qualities of the Messiah are righteousness and faithfulness. Do not think of these as two separate and unique qualities but as those which are reflective of God Himself. Yaweh is righteous and faithful. He is holy, and He keeps his promises. The Messiah possesses these qualities.

Actually, he does more than possess them; they are the essence of His character. That is why the Messiah is described as wearing righteousness and faithfulness as clothing. What's more, these character traits are both described as belts, which was an important piece of clothing that held everything together and provided the means of unhindered movement. A belt of righteousness is symbolic term that communicated a strength of character and importance. Central to His clothing was His belt. Central to His character was His righteousness.

To put on this spiritual clothing was to possess the reality of what is being talked about. Instead of saying, "The Messiah will be righteous," Isaiah says that He will put on the belt of righteousness. There is a similar theme in Isaiah 59:17.

¹⁷ He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Isaiah 59:17 (ESV)

What's more, there is a clear parallel in Ephesians 6 when Paul talks about the armor of God:

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness... Ephesians 6:13-14 (ESV)

In the same way that Messiah is clothed with righteousness, so too believers are to be clothed with the armor of God, and in Colossians they are to “put on” the new man (Colossians 3:5-17).

Now why does Isaiah 11 make this kind of statement about the Messiah? After talking about the power of judgment, why end with who He really is? I think it is because every aspect of hope in the future is conditioned on what the Messiah is really all about. If He is not righteous, then His power is a nightmare and His judgment will not be filled with hope.

There is hope in the Messiah because He is righteous. Without that, there is no hope. Isaiah’s message to Ahaz and the people of Judah was that they could put their trust in God’s ability to protect them. The Messiah would not fail them. He will right every wrong. He will destroy and defeat everything that is evil. And at the core of Himself, the Messiah is righteous. God could be trusted both now and in the future.

How Isaiah 11 Helps Us

So what do we make of this passage, and what lessons to have to learn from this text? What is God asking us to see in this passage today?

1. Unbelievers need to be warned

I don’t know how to say this gently, but I’ll try. The image of Jesus during Christmas time is appropriately cute, nostalgic, and comforting. A baby in a manger is not threatening to most people. But the message of the Bible is that the baby Jesus grows into a man, heals the sick, raises the dead, knows the hearts of people, and teaches them with authority. Even when He is crucified, He is raised from the dead, and He promises to come back as the deliverer of His people and the judge of the world.

Those who are still found in their sins when Jesus returns or when they die will be appropriately terrified of this King who has all authority and all knowledge. He knows everything, and there is nothing outside of His power to accomplish. Therefore, if you sing “O Come, O Come Immanuel” this Christmas while an unbeliever, you need to know that if He came again while you were not a believer, you would never sing that song. The solution, however, is not to stop singing Christmas carols. The remedy is to receive Jesus as your savior. You need to receive Him before it is too late.

2. Remember and rejoice in the fact that everything rests on Jesus

Advent is a time to celebrate the first coming of Jesus, and in the midst of all the wonderful expressions of celebration this time of year, do not forget one very important reality: this Christ-child is everything. Without Him there would be no atonement, no forgiveness, no reconciliation, no promise of eternal life, and no hope.

So be sure that somehow, and in some way, you make this a personal moment – a time to personally focus on who Jesus is and what He means to you as Savior and Lord. “Jesus is the reason for the season” may sound a bit cheesy because it is so over-used. But it really is true. Without Him there is no hope.

3. Injustice can be borne when you know the future

Isaiah 11 is a great reminder that if we have hope for a future Messiah who will execute perfect justice, then we can bear up under unfair treatment, oppression, and even persecution. Knowing that Jesus is going to one day make everything right with perfect clarity and eternal justice means that you can defer taking your pound of flesh. But even more you can bless people who are unkind, pray for those who are intentionally cruel, and live with freedom in this life from the need to settle the score. Listen to the model that Peter offers to us in light of the life of Jesus:

21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” 1 Peter 2:21–23 (ESV)

Maybe that relates to your past. Maybe this text needs to be applied when you are with some challenging family members over the holidays. Or maybe it will be a text that you are hearing today but will need in about six weeks. Just remember to keep entrusting yourself to the One who judges justly.

4. Trust him when afraid

Finally, I want to return to the main context of when this text was written. Isaiah 11 is written for people who feel the pressures of life around them. It is for people who are honestly battling to not give in to fear and doubt and despair. The encouragement in this text is to take the long view in your life. See the victory promised at the end. Savor its inauguration in the birth of Jesus. And then commit your heart to trust Him even while you are still afraid. Come to the throne of grace today, knowing that God is able to be trusted. He can be trusted with your reputation, your future, your life, and your eternal destiny.

*Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.*

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