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A shoot from the stump of Jesse. Who is the greatest?

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 11. 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 whole 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 inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathos, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, and those who harass Judah shall be cut off.

Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim. But they shall swoop down on the shoulder of the Philistines in the west, and together they shall plunder the people of the east. They shall put out their hand against Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites shall obey them.

And the Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt, and will wave his hand over the river with his scorching breath, and strike it into seven channels, and he will lead people across in sandals. And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt. Isaiah chapter 10 declared the Lord's coming judgment upon his people, describing the destruction brought by the Assyrians as if it were the great felling of a mighty forest, with the nation of Assyria serving as the Lord's axe.

Such imagery of the cutting down of the proud and the lofty trees of the land has been prominent throughout the book of Isaiah to this point, introduced in places like chapter 2 verses 12 to 13. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low, against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up, and against all the oaks of Bashan. Elsewhere, in places like chapter 5, the vineyard is made into a place of thorns and briars, verses 5 to 6 of that chapter.

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

Another image of the cutting down of trees is found at the end of Isaiah's commission in chapter 6, verses 11 to 13 of that chapter. Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump. The preceding chapter ended with another image of trees being cut down, in verses 33 to 34 of chapter 10. 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. Commentators differ over whether this is referring to Judah or the Lord's judgment upon Assyria with which much of chapter 10 is concerned.

Whichever of the two it is, within chapter 10 we do read of the Lord's judgment upon his people as a sort of deforestation of the land. Assyria is the axe of the Lord's wrath, and with Assyria he has been chopping down the proud and the lofty. The chopping down of the mighty trees of the land is so devastating that the Davidic dynasty itself is presented as if it were cut down beyond David himself, down to the very stump of Jesse, David's father.

Jesse wasn't a man of great significance beyond being the father of David. When the Davidic dynasty is felled, he is all that remains. The axe of the Lord will leave little behind it.

We might also think of the stump of Jesse as the reduced kingdom after the invasion of the Assyrians. The Assyrians in 701 BC came up to the neck of Jerusalem and almost wiped it out, and from that stump a glorious nation will arise. New life will spring up after devastation.

Chapter 11 is a prophecy of great promise, speaking into a situation of near desolation and extinction, assuring the people that the Lord can build up from the rubble. The chopped and the charred stump of what was once the glorious Davidic dynasty stands in the wasteland of Judah. However, a small shoot emerges from the seemingly dead stump.

It becomes a branch, and the branch bears fruit. The branch is a prophetic symbol referring to a messianic figure, one who will represent the Davidic kingdom and restore the temple, leading the people into a time beyond judgment. We read of the figure of the branch in Zechariah.

Jeremiah also speaks of the branch in chapter 23 verses 5 to 6, and then later in chapter 33 verses 15 to 16. In the former chapter he writes, In Azar chapter 11, the Davidic branch is life from the dead. David died, and then his dynasty seemingly died, but now it is rising again and new life is coming up from it.

The Davidic branch, the messianic figure, will be anointed by the spirit. The spirit of the Lord will rest upon him in a fourfold way. Verse 2 makes four parallel statements about the spirit in relation to the branch.

Seven characteristics of the spirit are mentioned. The spirit is the spirit of the Lord, of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. These are the virtues needed by a great king, who can establish, protect, and rule his people well.

The branch will be characterized by just rule. He will be impartial and equitable in his judgment and execution of justice. He will ensure that the poor and the meek receive justice, both righteously judging their disputes and ensuring that judgment is executed speedily.

He will speak with an authority that cuts off oppressors and wrongdoers, and the result of the rule of the branch will be the establishment of a new Eden, an Eden that exceeds even the original. The original Eden was a garden in an almost entirely untamed world, but this new Eden will have a peace that flows out into the wider world. Predatory animals will have been tamed and will coexist even with children, and the more vulnerable domesticated animals.

We could take this imagery in a number of different ways. Perhaps it is a more literal account of the end of predation. Perhaps it's a more figurative account of peace more generally.

Or perhaps the animals more specifically symbolize predatory nations. The knowledge of the Lord, direct experience of his salvation, and familiarity with his character and ways will fill the earth. And when that day comes, the branch will stand as a signal in the midst of the nations, all of the nations flocking to learn from him.

Back in chapter 5 verse 26, the Lord spoke of setting up a signal for the nations, summoning nations to come in judgment upon his people. Now, however, the Lord will recover the remnant of his people from the lands to which he scattered them. The nations that were once used to scatter them will now be used to gather them.

He will raise the signal and draw them back. The once divided kingdom will be unified. A new exodus-like event will occur, and the people will be assembled from all of the corners of the earth, established secure over their enemies.

Natural barriers will be removed or overcome, and Israel will be replanted, secure against its enemies. A deep challenge for interpreters of these words of Isaiah is whether they actually came to pass. Christopher Seitz notes the higher standards to which prophecies of salvation seem to be held in scripture, observing Jeremiah chapter 28 verses 8 to 9. There, Jeremiah the prophet challenges Hananiah, saying, The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.

As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet. In the book of Isaiah to this

point, we've had some very accurate prophecies, both of judgment and of salvation, prophecies that would be fulfilled in the lifetime of the prophet who delivered them. However, interspersed with these, there are prophecies that seem to strain for a far greater fulfillment, a fulfillment that in its fullest sense does not seem to have occurred within the expected time frame.

In some of these cases, we could argue for anticipatory or partial fulfillments, but the description of the messianic figure in this passage, for instance, does not seem to fit well the character of Hezekiah, and certainly not his son Manasseh. Although life would come up again from the root of Jesse, and there would be some measure of a restoration, the prophecy of this chapter could not reasonably be said to be fulfilled in the years following 701 BC. Some measure of a greater fulfillment could be said to occur after the Babylonian exile.

At that time, some people who had been in exile would return to the land, and there would be something of a flourishing of the people. And yet, for all the blessing that the Lord gave to his people in that period, there was nothing of the scale of the promise that is given in chapter 2 verses 1 to 4, or here concerning the root of Jesse. The branch is still an anticipated figure in the book of Zechariah.

There is, of course, a much greater fulfillment of this to be seen in the figure of Christ, in whom the figure of the Davidic branch is fully realized. He will pacify the nations, subduing them to the authority of his word, teaching them peace and taming the once wild beasts. He is the one who has the Holy Spirit without measure, who gathers his people from all corners and accomplishes a new exodus, establishing a new people in security.

Nations that were once at war with each other are gathered to the mountain of the Lord, where they seek the branch. The knowledge of the Lord covers the earth, with people of all tribes, tongues and nations, experiencing the salvation and goodness of God. Old enmities are overcome, and where once all trees were felled, a mighty forest of cedars rises, a temple of the Lord's dwelling by his Holy Spirit.

Of course, even in the current day, we look forward to a yet greater fulfillment of this in the age to come. Here, then, we see a feature that is common in much of biblical prophecy. In connection with the coming day of the Lord, people receive promises of, and a foretaste of, a much more glorious visitation in a yet distant horizon.

A question to consider, reading this prophecy alongside that of chapter 2, what elements does this chapter bring to its vision of the future that were absent in that earlier chapter? Mark chapter 9 verses 30-50 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and when he is killed, after three days he will rise again. But they did not understand the

saying, and were afraid to ask him.

And they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he asked them, What were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve, and he said to them, If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his hands, he said to them, Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me, but him who sent me.

John said to him, Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us. But Jesus said, Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me, for the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out.

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.

In the concluding half of Mark chapter 9, Jesus once again predicts his death and resurrection. And once again his disciples fail to understand. They presumably think he's speaking some strange sort of parable here, when on this particular matter he's speaking entirely plainly.

He's giving them the details down to the specifics of the specific people who will be responsible for his death and the day on which he will rise again. The question of who is the greatest? Obviously occupied the disciples thoughts on this and many other occasions. The typical human desire for exaltation over others is being expressed here.

And Jesus' response to it is to show them a child. The kingdom of God does not work in the same way as the kingdoms of this world, the societies of this world. The child challenges people to humble themselves, not to be people who vaunt themselves over others, who seek to have an expression of their superiority, of their honour, of their status.

We are not to be invested in the competitive games of honour that consume so many other people and their attention, their concern. It becomes their preoccupation and it's not to be like that for the people of God. Rather the disciples are to recognise their dependence, their unworthiness, their lack of honour and status and to resist the pursuit of exalting themselves over others.

Greatness comes through loving service of others. If you want to be first, you must be last. If you want to be the greatest, you must be the servant of all.

Greatness also comes through welcoming and receiving of the weak. The section of the passage that we're looking at now has a lot to say about how we recognise each other and the way in which our receiving of each other, our recognition of each other and our honouring of each other is a way of honouring and receiving Christ. Here it's found in receiving the weak person, in receiving the child, in receiving the person who's dependent, who's without honour and status, who doesn't have anything to offer us in return.

As we receive them, we are receiving Christ and as we receive Christ, we are receiving the one who sent Christ and we will be rewarded. But instead of trying to exalt ourselves over others, the alternative is not just recognising the goodness of the child, it's recognising that the kingdom works in a very different way. As you show honour to those who do not naturally receive honour, you will be honoured by the one who has sent Christ, by the Father himself.

Children are highlighted as the example. They should be seen as representative of the wider group of weak and dependent persons. But they are important in their own right.

A number of people have seen Jesus paying attention to children and putting forward children as examples of the kingdom and have said that he must be referring to something else, that the children must illustrate some other group of persons. Now they do illustrate a wider group of persons, but they illustrate those wider group of persons precisely as children, precisely as the sort of group that you would not pay attention to in themselves. The sort of group that you would think they obviously are referring to some other group.

It can't be children. Children lack the mental capacity or maybe they lack the age to be recognised as part of society, whatever it is that might cause us to discount them. It seems to me that Christ is challenging that.

That the people of the kingdom are defined by the least, by the weakest among them. Those are the ones we are to honour and as we honour them, we will be honoured by Christ. This is not then the pursuit of honour and status for ourselves, of self-aggrandisement that the disciples had exemplified.

Rather it's about giving ourselves to others. It's about honouring others ahead of ourselves and that is how we will be honoured. Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give you anything in return, who might threaten your status rather than raising it.

The way that we treat children, the poor, the mentally disabled, the dependent and other such persons is how we follow or fail to follow Christ's example. Jesus surrendered his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves to his attention and we are to do the same. This incident is followed by the disciples seeing a man casting out demons and rebuking him.

It's reminiscent of Numbers chapter 11 verses 26-29. Jesus in his response to the disciples challenges their sectarianism. Indeed, even the smallest act of hospitality given to an apostle because they belong to Christ would not go unrewarded.

Just a cup of water would be enough. This is fleshed out in much more detail in Matthew chapter 25. Should note also here that Jesus refers to himself as the Christ.

Jesus had challenged the way in which they failed to recognise the weak and sought to put themselves over others. Now Jesus is challenging their sectarianism, their failure to recognise people outside of their camp. This is all about how we recognise and honour people and this theme continues through into the next body of teaching.

Jesus talks about the importance of dealing radically with obstacles to the weak. The connection to Jesus' teaching on adultery for instance. In the Sermon on the Mount, we must deal radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves but others from stumbling.

If we do not deal with sin, if we do not deal with those things that might wound others in the body of Christ decisively, then we are in danger of hell itself. The challenge here is to deal with anything that would lead to abuse, that would lead to destruction of the weak. We must recognise the weak.

It's so often within churches, the case that people will treat the weak, the dependent, the people who have no honour, as if they could be collateral damage of those with honour and status and platforms. That's not how it's supposed to be in the body of Christ. The weak and the dependent and the children are seen by God himself.

God sees the orphan and the widow. He sees the one who is poor. He sees the child.

And a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak and allows them to be abused is no Christianity at all. This is once again all about how we recognise people, how we honour people. The description of the great millstone hung around the neck and the person being cast into the sea maybe reminds us of the description of Babylon the Great.

In Revelation 18, verse 21, The destruction of such cities can be connected with their inhospitality to the poor, the weak, those in need. And we must not be such people. A question to consider.

How might Leviticus chapter 2, verse 13 help us to read the final verses of this chapter?