



Ancient Cliff Notes

a child is born

Isaiah 9:2-7

December 16, 2018

Courage Church, Detroit, MI

scriptures: Isaiah 9:2-7, Isaiah 7:14, Judges 7, 2 Kings 20, Matthew 1:20, Exodus 5.

Almost this entire fall season we have been in a series called “Ancient Cliff Notes” - looking at passages in the Old Testament and learning about what actually happened in these

ancient stories... how these ancient stories can actually help us live in our modern world, today... and how these ancient stories point to Jesus.

Today we will do something a bit different.

Because this is the last message before our family Christmas service, and because we didn't really do a Christmas series this year, we thought that it would be fitting today to look at an Old Testament Prophecy, that points to the New Testament story of Jesus' birth.

it is a prophesy that told us that even in the midst of a world where everything seems completely broken... a child is coming who is going to put it all back together again.

I am going to read a passage out of the book of Isaiah, but this will NOT be a cliff notes through the book of Isaiah. Perhaps we can do that another time. We are going to instead today, look at a couple key verses in Isaiah that relate to Christmas, and sort of cliff notes through some of the historical things going on during the time Isaiah was writing, during the time that he was pointing back to, and the time that many believe he was prophesying would come, and in fact DID COME.

This may seem like the LEAST Christmasy Christmas message ever given, because we are going to look at several stories that it would seem have

NOTHING to do with Christmas as we know it... but stories that Isaiah's messianic prophesy either directly MENTION or hint at.

Even though it is in the Old Testament, a lot of people actually call Isaiah the 5th Gospel (theological interpretation of the Old Testament, page 194) because of how much it has to say about the Messiah who was to come. The early commentator Jerome actually said of Isaiah that he should have been called an evangelist, rather than a prophet, because "he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the church so clearly that one would think he is composing a history of what already happened rather than prophesying what is to come" (theological interpretation of the Old testament, page 195).

There is just so much that Isaiah says that points to the things Jesus would one day fulfill... but something that we have to also be aware of, is prophets in the ancient world were also preachers (Routledge, Old Testament introduction, page 281.) And just about everything that they would say, prophetic as much of it was, also related to the world that they were living in and preaching to in that time.

In the time leading up to the passage we will read, Ahaz was King, and Assyria was about to invade Israel. Isaiah 7:14 is the famous passage that is translated "the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" - because Immanuel means God with us... and though we know that that verse is later quoted to describe God coming in the flesh as Jesus in Matthew 1, what it would have meant to Israel when they first heard it would have been understood more as "God acting on our behalf" (The Lord's anointed, page 100) - that even in the middle of what would seem like a hopeless time for Israel, that God would still act on their behalf, and would redeem them... and of course we know that ultimately that happens through Jesus.

To Israel, though we know now that this passage would ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus, it was believed by them that the Isaiah was talking about Hezekiah, Ahaz's son. Ahaz was a wicked King, but Hezekiah loved the Lord and served him faithfully. When Hezekiah took reign, he destroyed all the idols, the temple was re-opened... he did a lot of good, and compared to his father, he would have seemed like the savior of Israel.

but lets look at what Isaiah says in this famous prophecy... It is very powerful stuff. It is found in Isaiah 9:2-7. I am just going to read the passage, then we will dive into some thoughts on it.

If you are following along in our pew Bibles, this passage begins on page 536 and rolls into 537.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.



By the time the final words were written of the Old Testament, Israel had grown weary of waiting for a Messiah to come.

The narrative of Israel went something like this:

a man named Abraham is given a promise... God made a covenant with him saying that Abraham would be the Father of a great nation...

the problem with THAT, is that Abraham was essentially just a normal dude. He wasn't a King. He wasn't an emperor or a Pharaoh. He was just a guy.

Then, 14 generations later (according to Matthew's genealogy) - a guy named David came... David was the Son of Jesse, a descendant of Abraham, and David was a great warrior and a great leader, but he was born, what would seem to be a generation late... because it was Saul who was chosen to be King when Israel insisted on establishing a King, and Saul had three son's of his own who it was assumed that at least one of them would carry on his throne after he died.

The problem with THAT, is in one battle ALL THREE OF SAUL'S SON'S DIED, and Saul was so distraught about the loss of all of his children that he fell on his own sword, leaving Israel once again, with no King.

And so David, who is of the house of Abraham, the Father of the nations... was made King. And suddenly, it all seemed to be coming together... in fact, during David's reign, a prophet named Nathan actually prophesied that a King would come from the him... from David... from his family... and this King would reign FOREVER!!!

One King. Whose reign would never end. So it is obvious, if you were a part of this family... you were part of a group of people who had every reason in the world to be excited and to walk confidently knowing that the throne will never, ever NOT be in your family. Even prophets like Isaiah gave all of these confirmations that a King would come from David and reign forever.

And it stayed that way for a while. 14 more generations according to Matthew's genealogy...

That is until around 586 B.C. when Babylon, who had taken over Israel a decade earlier, stripped the King of his crown, and brought the entire nation into exile.

Suddenly, the royal family was just like every other family. They were slaves. And the hope and the promise of a Kingdom without end were now only day dreams and fantasies. Even when the exile was over, the family line of David was no longer one of power or Kingship or Majesty.

but instead, they were back, right where they started... just normal people.

No real hope of establishing a throne like the one that Nathan spoke of when he prophesied over David.

Disappointment. Frustration. Anger. Sadness. Feeling lied too... Feeling let down... feeling like it all was a giant joke on them was the way that most people felt for the generations that would follow. And then, after the prophet Malachi penned his last words, even the prophets went silent.

Nobody dared to speak of hope because hope was shaping up to be a lie. And that is essentially where the people of Israel are left when the Old Testament ends.

-

Then, there was somewhere around 400 years in which it seemed like God was utterly and completely silent.

Dark. Gone. Nowhere to be seen.

And some of the prophecies given over 700 years before that were all but forgotten.

and over this dark period, in which it seemed like God was silent, began the rise of the Roman Empire. An army unlike anything that the world had seen

before, rising out of a city unlike anything that the world had ever seen before.

They created their own way of dating time, it was called Ab Urbe Condita (A.U.C.) which is a Latin phrase that means "from the founding of the City (Rome)"

it took 700 years to build Rome into what it had become by then, and its empire reigned from what we know as India, all the way to Spain and up to England.

They were setting up the world to be dependent on *their* systems, by taxing people so heavily that folks could no longer afford to keep their own land and had to depend on the government to give them what they needed.

all the way down to their dating system, they were trying to rewrite history around the idea that TIME STARTED WHEN ROME WAS FOUNDED, and everything falls into this system.

Caesar Augustus took power around 27 B.C. - which, we did a sermon on this a couple years ago but I found absolutely fascinating that today, every significant date in Rome's history is recorded on a timeline based on the life of Jesus Christ, and their system, like every other government system, eventually collapsed.

But when Augustus took power, he took things to a whole other level, essentially working to unite the whole world under his leadership. Augustus is only mentioned ONE time in the Bible, so we have to turn to the history books to learn everything else... but the one time that he is mentioned in the Bible tells us A LOT about him... The verse is Luke 2:1, and it says "in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."

So he was a person with SO MUCH POWER, that he could issue a decree that the entire world had to follow.

After his adopted Father Julius Caesar was assassinated, there was a huge star in the sky, but it disappeared in an instant. When that happened,

the wise men of the day said that it was Julius Caesar going to take his place in Heaven... so naturally, if Julius was God, that would make Augustus the SON OF GOD.

So before stepping into the role of Caesar, Augustus inaugurated a 12 day advent in his own honor. Hopefully you are starting to see the type of world that Jesus was born into.

Augustus put his face on all the coins with a phrase written on it that said "Son of the Divine" and his army would go into cities and drag people out and ask them "who is Lord" and if that person did not say "Caesar is Lord" they would be beaten, imprisoned and sometimes killed. Some recurring themes that people spoke of were things like "There is no other name given to men by which we may be saved than Augustus." Which of course we know is exactly what Peter says ABOUT JESUS in Acts 4:12.

All of the things that we later find out are true about JESUS, people are saying and even forcing onto the world about the man who ruled the world that Jesus was born into.

So for the people of Israel who believed "there is no God but Jehovah" - this was a pretty difficult time in history to be alive.

and an even harder time to keep your faith. Not only were you at risk of being killed just for holding fast to your God... but the God that you would be dying for had been completely silent for 400 years. I imagine a lot of doubt would get built up over 400 years.

But the people who have walked in the land of great darkness, on them a light has shone.

And when the world felt the darkest... hope shined the brightest as the true Immanuel was born to an unwed teenage mom who by all standards was not qualified to be the mother of the Messiah... But Joseph, the man she would marry, who was with her the whole time, ADOPTED Jesus, and raised Jesus, and loved Jesus as if he were his own son...

And Joseph it just so happens was of the house and lineage of David.

And in the same way that Augustus was the ADOPTED SON of Julius Caesar, yet the world accepted him as Caesar AND as Lord... and even celebrated him with a 12 day advent...

Jesus was also adopted by Joseph, who agreed to still marry Mary, when an angel told him that the child she was carrying was from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:20)

But Jesus wasn't greeted with an advent celebration like we give him now... like they gave Caesar, *then*. He was greeted with hostility, because a man named Herod, one of Augustus's governors, was so threatened by what he had heard of this baby that he set out to have the baby killed before he could ever grow up into power. and, not knowing exactly when Jesus was born or who he even is, he put out a decree that ALL CHILDREN in Bethlehem, two years or younger, be killed.

The ultimate point, is that when the child finally arrives, the arrival is met with utter darkness. Tragedy in every home with young children. Devastation. ALL BECAUSE OF THIS CHILD. And yet this child is supposed to be the one, that THAT GOVERNMENT will be on his shoulder? That larger than life government is going to be brought to justice by THAT CHILD?

What we fail to realize when we celebrate Christmas is that, even though to us, today, it is a day that the world rallies together around, and generosity steps up several notches, and hope fills the air...

The first Christmas was anything but a happy time.

Not only did it come at a great cost to every family who was close to Jesus... but it CAME AS A REVOLUTION that directly contradicted the most powerful government in the history of the world.

All that to say, for Israel... Jesus just wasn't what they were looking for.

See, when you realize the pattern that the people of God had been in for centuries leading up to this moment, you understand more clearly WHAT IT

IS THEY WERE LOOKING FOR, HOPING FOR, AND WHY IT IS THAT THEY MISSED IT WHEN IT FINALLY CAME.

And the reason that it's important to study today... is because I believe that there are many people, even people who claim to be Christians... who have, just like Israel... MISSED IT.

Isaiah's prophecy says this: "his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore."

The idea, is that the world system IS OPPRESSING THEM through things like violence and abuse of power and out of balance scales, and therefore in their minds, God is going to send them a leader who, using that same system, will fight back on behalf of Israel and will, through means of violence and war gain power and bring their enemies to its knees.

So for Israel, when they read "unto us a child is born" - they think "Hezekiah." The son of Ahaz. The thought was: our wicked King Ahaz has gotten us into a bigger mess, and this child is one who loves the Lord. And he did. Hezekiah was one of the most righteous kings that Israel ever had.

But here is the problem with Hezekiah being Israel's Immanuel child.

Hezekiah, though he served the Lord and loved the Lord... was still human, and every human makes mistakes. Hezekiah made a strange one... a bit of an obscure one, but it was significant. It is recorded in 2 Kings 20.

The King of Babylon sends presents to Hezekiah because he heard that Hezekiah had been sick... and when the Babylonians came to deliver the present, for whatever reason, Hezekiah had what seemed to be a moment of great pride in the life that he had, and he BEGAN showing off his house to the Babylonians... the Bible says that he showed them ALL of his treasure... his gold, his spices, his oils, his armory. There was NOTHING that he didn't show them (2 Kings 20:13) - essentially painting a picture that He had built a successful life.

and Isaiah hears about this, and he rebukes Hezekiah, and this is what he tells him... this is crazy to me... he tells him: “everything in your house that you showed them will become theirs.”

Everything you have... that you THINK GIVES YOU WORTH... you are going to lose.

which of course we know lead to the Babylonian exile. That moment in history when suddenly the family line of David was stripped of their royalty.

Basically... they are back in Egypt. Disappointed. enslaved... waiting for the day when the words of Isaiah would come to pass and God turns this thing around for them.

But when I read this prophecy, I can't help but wonder if the reason that Israel would take words like these and buy into an idea that God was going to redeem them, in the SAME manner that Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and now Rome had oppressed THEM, COULD BE because:

YOU CAN read that prophecy and see a clear outcome. The clear outcome is that the GOVERNMENT WILL BE ON HIS SHOULDERS. - and the Kingdom will last FOREVER.

But if you look closely at the prophecy, you can also see a process.

And if you put the emphasis on the outcome and not the process, you end up thinking that God is going to reign the same way that Caesar reigns.

Look at this piece kind of in the center of the whole passage (v4-5):

For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

When you read the prophecy, this is the part that most of us skip over. Because we can't figure out how to fit Jesus into it... But this middle part is

so significant. I used to gloss over this as if it weren't even there, and now I consider this to be the central point of the entire passage.

The phrase "the rod of his oppression" was a reference to the way that Exodus described Egypt. (Exodus 3:7; 5:6, 10–14) - particularly in Exodus 5... In Exodus 5 Moses demands that Pharaoh let God's people go, and instead, Pharaoh increases their burden by telling them that he will no longer provide the straw for them to make bricks, yet he still demanded that they produce the same amount of bricks each day.

You needed straw to make bricks, because the clay would not dry quickly enough without it, and would be much more likely to crumble.

Now, the oppressors were making them go out and gather their own straw, and still produce the same amount of bricks each day, essentially placing an IMPOSSIBLE burden on the people.

This is how empires control people. One way or another, they keep them working, they keep them busy doing the things that they have to do in order to survive the day, and leave them no time to consider what it may take to give themselves a different life than the one that they have.

They strip them of their dignity and their sense of worth and do everything they can to convince them that nothing better is possible.

At the slightest hint of resistance, they increase the burden so even more energy has to be spent on the work leaving less time to even think about resisting, forcing you to see that going against the empire only makes your life even worse.

But just one chapter before, Isaiah used all of those words to directly describe the way ASSYRIA was going to oppress Israel.

So Isaiah uses language that first points WAY BACK, to the oppression Israel faced at the hand of Egypt (1275 BC) and the amazing way that God redeemed his people the first time, also connecting it to the modern problem they are facing, and then ends the sentence by summing it all up with the story of Gideon. (1100's BC)

Gideon and his army are preparing to face the Midian army, and God wants to use this battle as an example of how great he is and wants to make sure that Gideon's army doesn't for a moment think that THEY did anything to win the battle. So the army, which began with about 32,000 men, God dwindles down to 300 men, and then He tells them to go into the battle without weapons.

They bring torches and blow horns and it causes Midian to go so crazy that they begin killing each other.

It was an obvious moment of "we didn't DO this. This battle would have been impossible if it wasn't for God."

Do you see the pattern? God wants us to know THAT WHATEVER IT IS THAT HE IS GOING TO DO IS ONLY BECAUSE OF WHO HE IS, NOT BECAUSE OF WHO WE ARE OR WHAT WE DO.

God wants to show the people who are on the margins... the underdogs, the outcasts... the oppressed... to put their HOPE IN HIM and HE WILL FIGHT THEIR BATTLES. You can NOT face it on your own!

But Isaiah isn't pointing backward just to tell an old story. This is a prophecy. He is pointing backward, to point FORWARD.

To a time when the world was the darkest... when God hadn't spoken for a while...

to a world where you get what you want by using military force... by invading countries, and killing people, and figuring out ways that you can weigh people down with burdens so heavy that they have to depend ON YOU just give them a break from that burden...

and yet in the middle of all of that God says the boots of the tramping warriors and garments rolled in blood...

in other words... the tools of destruction that are the image of the things that seem to be winning the world... He says you can THROW THEM IN THE FIRE.

all the things that you think will give you power, and get you what you want... all the things that you think it takes to rule the world, and end up ahead... all the treasures in your house that you are showing off to make yourself feel good..

all the military gear that you put on to prepare to go into a battle that you have convinced yourself you are strong enough to win...

take them off and throw them into the fire because that is where they are going anyway.

For everything boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult...

or maybe we say it this way: for every time someone has ever had their foot on your back... for every time you have EVER FELT USED. For every time you have ever felt judged for the things that make you different...

For the night you have tried to forget but can't seem to live down...

For the weight of the world that you make yourself carry...

For the WORDS someone has said that have pierced your heart and right into your soul and are slowly killing you from the inside EVERY SINGLE DAY...

Throw it in the fire.

And to me, there could not be a more significant moment... than the image of a fire, being fueled by all the things that the world THINKS gives it power...

FOR... UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN. and His name is Jesus.

God says “I will show you where true strength comes from...” and, in the most counter-intuitive, upside down message a world ruled this way could possibly have received... we find that the whole thing is being turned on its head, BY A BABY.

Born on a night just like any other night... to a poor family, in a nothing town that didn't even have a room in an inn available for them to stay at.

Who immediately BECAME REFUGEES, fleeing a government that literally was trying to kill Him.

Who would grow up and teach us that it is the meek who inherit the earth... not the power hungry who have taken it by force.

You can burn all the things that society has convinced us are what bring about change... because even the concept of an empire is as temporary of a concept as anything else to ever exist... not one has survived the test of time. And in the last 2,000 years, the ONLY institution that HAS survived the entire time is the church of Jesus Christ.

And Isaiah knew it would... He knew that OF THIS CHILD'S KINGDOM, there would be no end.

and that is the message of Christmas. It's political. It's rebellious... it is upside down.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder”

it is the message to every single Mom who has raised had to raise the kids alone while working three jobs, that things will not stay this way forever.

It is the message to the person on the corner begging for bread that tomorrow CAN BE BETTER THAN TODAY... that you are NOT defined by what you have done... and that Jesus Christ is in the business of making ALL THINGS NEW, EVERY DAY.

it is the message that oppression may win the day, but it will not win the war... and all who live by the sword will one day die by the sword, but the eternal reign of peace knows no end.

it is the message to the sick... the lame... the broken... the hurting... the lost... the oppressed... the marginalized... that yes, the world has positioned itself with its foot on your back to keep you down, but when it all feels the darkest... a light has broken through.

It is the message to the sinner, that there is HOPE, and there is FORGIVENESS.

A child has been born... and it will ALL be on his shoulders.

and we just can't buy into the notion here, that it is just for us. That is why we rally a little extra at Christmas. Because if you see a great light, and you know how dark the rest of the world is... what could possibly be more important than getting that light into those dark places?

Jesus tells us in the sermon on the mount that WE ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

carriers of the message of hope.

Yesterday, over 700 kids came through this building. 700. That is just kids. And every single one of them heard the Gospel and every single one of them is going to have at least one present that their Mom or Dad personally picked out for them that they will be able to open on Christmas morning, or Christmas Eve or however and whenever they celebrate.

and if nothing else, at least we made it clear to our community, that we are here. That there is somewhere that they can turn, when they feel like they can't carry that weight on their own.

Its not about toys... its not about stuff...

if we ever start to think that, we may as well throw all that in the fire as well. If we pat ourselves on the back like WE did something... THROW IT IN THE FIRE.

That is why I love the way our church is built on partnerships... because WE KNOW WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING WITHOUT GOD BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER.

He is the source of light, we just have the honor of being one of His carriers of it.

But this is the truth, and this is why I love our church SO much... and this is why I believe that God TAKES CARE OF US when we set our hearts on taking care of people:

the world is RUN by GREED but it IS WON BY GENEROSITY.

and that generosity is the Gospel. That God so loved the world that He GAVE his ONLY Son... that Christ would give up His throne, and come live amongst us... Immanuel... God with us... Immanuel... God, moving on our behalf.

We all know what happened to Caesar Augustus... He died.

We know what happened to the great Roman empire...

IT FELL...

Augustus stayed dead, time stamped at August 19, 14 A.D. - and the Roman dating system was thrown out... it was no match for this child.

and Rome never again was what it once was... But Jesus Christ resurrected, and His church is more powerful after His resurrection than even He was in his short lifetime.

He was more powerful in His death, than even in His life...

Because Generosity won the world.