

Root and Branch, Stump and Shoot
Isaiah 11:1-10
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(Sermon Transcript/Extended Notes)

By Rich Lusk

G. K. Chesterton is one of my favorite authors. In his wildly funny and futuristic novel *Napoleon of Notting Hill*, he talks about a game the human race has been playing for a long, long time.

It's a game called "cheat the prophet."

This is how it goes, according to Chesterton's description: The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead. They bury them nicely. Then they go and do something entirely different.

Chesterton, writing this novel in 1904, said the game of "Cheat the Prophet" was far more difficult at the beginning of the 20th century than it ever had been before. The reason was, as Chesterton put it, that there were so many prophets and so many prophecies, it was difficult to elude all their predictions.

Whenever a man did something free and spontaneous, a horrible thought struck him afterwards: *it might have been predicted*. He might have unwittingly fulfilled a prophecy, proving one of the clever men right. The prophets had put the people in quite an unprecedented difficulty. It seemed really hard to do anything without fulfilling some of their prophecies.

Well, we can enjoy Chesterton's sarcastic mockery of those obsessed with predicting and knowing what the future holds.

In the novel, Chesterton (being the clever man he is!) gets the last laugh. The story he tells is set in London 80 years in the future, in 1984.

And yet he describes London exactly as it was in his own day. He knew better than to hazard guesses about the future. He knew one way for a prophet to avoid being cheated was to not make any predictions.

The prophet Isaiah told his first hearers and readers a futuristic story -- not just one generation in the future, not just 80 years in the future -- he told of things to come some 750 years in the future and beyond!!!

He prophesied about the Messiah and his kingdom.

And yes, the human race tried to play "cheat the prophet." They sought to thwart the glorious prophecies of Isaiah by crucifying the Messiah. They tried to reject the kingdom he

came to bring, to preserve the status quo, under the principalities and powers of the world.

But to their horror they unwittingly brought the prophets words to pass. Their very efforts to cheat the prophet fulfilled the words of the prophet! For the prophet foretold that they would try to cheat him, and that the Lord would reverse their plot. Through the death (and then resurrection) of Jesus, all Isaiah foretold came to pass. In Isaiah 11, we have one of the fullest and most glorious prophecies in all of scripture concerning Messiah and his kingdom. Isaiah is a prophet who cannot be cheated because his words are not simply the predictions of a wise man, but a revelation of God's eternal plan and purpose.

But in order to grasp this prophetic word picture Isaiah paints for us, and to see how it comes to fulfillment, we need some background. Up to this point in his book, Isaiah has been prophesying doom against the covenant people of God. He has told them that because of their idolatry and apostasy that judgment is coming. The once great dynasty of King David will come to an end. David's family tree will be cut down, reduced to a humble stump. The people will be taken from the promised land and carried into exile. They will be put under the curses of the covenant.

We see this judgment graphically portrayed in v. 1 of chapter 11. It says a rod will come forth from the stem of Jesse (or, the stump of Jesse, cut down by Assyria, described in Isaiah 10 as an axe in God's hand). In the prophet's picture, the Davidic kingdom has been cut down. The kingdom of David had once been a great and mighty, flourishing tree -- but now God has chopped it down, leaving only a stump. God has used a pagan axe to cut down his covenant people.

But devastation gives way to hope, and judgment gives way to life. From this barren stump of Jesse, shall come forth a shoot, or a branch. In other words, the Davidic dynasty/kingdom will come to life again. David's house will rise from the dead.

As new covenant believers/members we know what this means. We have the clue, the missing puzzle piece that Isaiah didn't yet have. We know that Jesus Christ is the branch that comes from the fallen house of David, He's the promised Son of David, the one through whom David's felled tree is made to live and grow again.

But there's something else very important to notice. In 11:1, Jesus is called a branch that grows out of Jesse's stump. But look at verse 10: Isaiah says, "and in that day, there shall be a Root of Jesse.

Jesus is not only the branch that comes from Jesse, He is Jesse's root. Messiah is root and branch.

Now how can this be? This is a riddle/mystery. How can the Messiah be the descendant of Jesse, a sprout of Jesse, but at the same time be the root from which the house of Jesse grows? How can he be Jesse's descendant and Jesse's ancestor?

This is one of many prophetic mysteries. It is a riddle that would only be solved in the fullness of time. How can he be the source of David's kingdom and its culmination, both root and branch? It's simple if you have the New Testament answer key: only by being God

and man! In a mysterious, veiled way, Isaiah has pointed ahead to the incarnation. David's son will also be God's Son. He's flesh of David's flesh, but also very God of very God.

- As man, he is David's descendant, David's promised son. The NT emphasizes that the human ancestry of Jesus traced back to David.
- As God, he is David's root, David's creator and sustainer, the one who established, maintained, and completed the Davidic dynasty.

He is both David's son and David's Lord.

Isaiah's description of the Messiah continues in verse 2. "The Spirit of the Lord will come upon Him . . ." and a seven-fold description of that Spirit is given. The Spirit of the Lord will come upon this branch, in all his fullness; the Son will be given the Spirit by the Father without limit. The number 7 is the number of fullness and perfection. (Numbers are often used symbolically in Scripture.) He's given the Spirit "without limit" or "beyond measure" as John says (Jn. 3).

The Spirit will provide wisdom and understanding. The Spirit will give him counsel -- the word describes military strategy. The Spirit will give him might or strength. And the Spirit will give him knowledge and the fear of the Lord. All the qualities that the OT describes as belonging to the ideal king will belong to Jesus.

Verses 3-5 go on to characterize and further sketch out the life and reign of Messiah Jesus. We're told that he will not judge merely according to what he sees and hears; rather his judgment will extend to the depths of the heart, and will be measured out in perfect justice and equity.

Judgment is always a feature of kingship in the OT. Kings are judges, and as judges, they are to know and even determine good and evil. They're to embody and enact God's perfect covenant faithfulness, mirroring his divine kingship. Of course Messiah will do this fully since he is God and man, the divine and human king in one person.

But be careful: Do not read this passage through the lens of our modern Western notions of judgment. Isaiah is doing more than simply telling us that there will be no flaws or blemishes in his work or rule as judge, that his law court will have all the evidence it needs to render a perfect verdict in every case.

The biblical model of judgment is much more than simply a sentence in a courtroom. Biblically, the judge also executes the sentence. He puts it into effect. The best example of this is the book of Judges, where the judges do not merely pass sentences, they enact and enforce them.

So the Messiah does not simply declare in favor of the poor and oppressed, he actually rescues them.

See, the poor and the meek here are almost surely a reference to godly Israelites languishing in exile, under pagan rule and oppression. The Messianic king comes as a new Moses to accomplish a new exodus for them. His judgment will take the shape of a new exodus. He

will rescue them. He will deliver them.

Further on in this chapter, in 11:11ff, we see a description of this new exodus. The prophet describes the future return from exile in language and categories drawn from the historic exodus. In fact, the new exodus becomes the predominant note of Isaiah's prophecy in chapters 40-66. Yes, there will be exile for God's people. But a new exodus is coming. When Messiah judges in their favor, they will be restored.

To unpack this further, God would never, could never, judge in favor of the poor and still leave them in their poverty, under oppression. He would never judge in favor of the meek of the earth, yet still fail to restore the earth to them as their inheritance. His judgment is efficacious. His justice is restorative.

Isaiah is describing Jesus, the Son of David, as the ideal king and ideal deliverer. When he passes judgment in favor of his people, that judgment will have a follow through and his people will be lifted up. As our great King, we can trust him to judge in faithfulness, to deliver us from our enemies, to rule in our favor in his law court. He will rescue the church from her enemies, redeem her out of slavery, and accomplish the new exodus. All these things are ours.

Verse 4 also tells us something about *how* Messiah will do these things. How will the favorable judgment come, how will the rescue mission be executed in the world, how will the new exodus be experienced?

“He shall strike the earth”

This is standard prophetic imagery for the preaching of Christ's word. The kingdom of Christ advances first and foremost through the faithful preaching of the gospel. Jesus defeats his enemies with the preached word. Even the fiercest jihad is no match for the sword of the gospel. Indeed, jihad, and other militaristic attempts at world transformation, are just parodies of the true Holy War which Christ's wages through the gospel.

As the word is proclaimed, Christ changes the course of history. He strikes the earth, bringing salvation to his people and a sentence of judgment against his enemies. As in creation, so in salvation and judgment: the word of the Lord comes with power. When the wicked are confronted with the preaching of the gospel, it slays them – either by converting them and saving them (slaying their wickedness and making them new), or it confirms and intensifies their judgment, by hardening them and serving as their death sentence. But either way, the word of Christ is effectual. It never returns void. Paul describes this two-fold effect of the word in 2 Corinthians 2. He says preaching is a fragrance of life to believers, but an aroma of death to unbelievers.

But there's a further question here, one we need to wrestle with: How can we say that this refers to *our* preaching when the rod and breath come from the mouth of Jesus?

The great 16th century Reformer John Calvin is ready with an answer: “When the prophet says he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips shall slay the wicked, this must not be limited to the person of Christ alone, for it refers to the

word which is preached by his ministers. Christ acts in them in such a way that he wishes their mouth to be reckoned as his mouth, and their lips as his lips.”

In other words, we are Christ’s representatives. He accomplishes his work through his people, as his gospel is announced in and by the church. The church preaches her way to dominion. She preaches the kingdom into the world – and the world into the kingdom. She preaches her way to victory.

Paul makes this point explicit in Romans 10. In the midst of declaring how necessary it is for the church to send out missionaries, Paul asks in verse 14, “How shall they call on him whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him WHOM [not *of whom* as some Bible translations have it] they have not heard?” In other words, if they haven’t heard Christ (speaking to them as the gospel is preached), how shall they believe? The only way to be saved is for Christ to preach to you.

Paul makes the same point in Ephesians 2, when he tells them that Christ came and preached peace to them. Because Christ never made a journey to Ephesus during his earthly ministry, he must be talking about Christ preaching through delegates.

In other words, when the gospel faithfully proclaimed, people are hearing Christ himself speak to them through his servants. CHRIST PREACHES THROUGH HIS PREACHERS. This is not to say that preachers speak infallibly as Christ himself would, or like inspired prophets and apostles. But when we proclaim the gospel, Christ is really proclaiming it through us. Preaching is his work. He’s the Preacher – the Preacher behind the preacher. He proclaims his gospel through his people, especially his ordained servants. But all of his people can serve as his mouthpieces. For example, as you explain God’s word to your children, you know that Christ is speaking to them, teaching them through you.

Now all this ought to humble (and scare!) preachers. It ought to humble us to think that Christ would stoop to use us this way. But it also ought to encourage us. We really are used by God! We’re the rod from his mouth. His breath blows through us. The kingdom advances through our proclamation of the gospel of grace. This is how he shapes history. Our feeble efforts really do make a difference. No matter how marginalized we are by the world’s power systems, we have the most powerful weapon in the world in the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom. As we declare what Christ has done, we are unfurling his victory banner over the nations. We’re planting his flag, his standard, in the nations. We’re striking the earth with his rod and slaying the wicked.

Now we can bring together verse 4 with the earlier description of Messiah’s possession of the Spirit. This king not only has the Spirit for himself, but for the sake of those he serves, for the sake of his people. Look at verse 4 – “with the breath (spirit) of his lips slays the wicked.”

What is that breath? Think of John 20. After Jesus’ resurrection, he breathes on the disciples and says “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The breath of Messiah is the Holy Spirit -- he breathes upon his people, giving them his Spirit to slay their wickedness, putting to death the old Adam and making a new creation.

Verse 4 shows us how Messiah will bring his kingdom in, how his rescue mission will be

enacted. It won't be with tanks or jet fighters. Now we can say, his breath goes forth through Spirit empowered preaching. The Spirit carries along the word, making it effectual.

But there's still, more here.

Look at how Messiah is dressed in verse 5 – he's not only equipped with the Spirit of the Lord, he wears a belt of righteousness and faithfulness.

Righteousness and faithfulness is a common pair of terms in Scripture. They're very closely related. Consider Psalm 143:1: David cries out to God "in your faithfulness answer me and in your righteousness." These are set in parallel. God's righteousness is manifested in his fidelity to the covenant. He's righteous because he's keeps his word. He will pass judgment in favor his people, manifesting both righteousness (according to the covenant norms) and faithfulness (by keeping the covenant promises).

Or consider 1 John 1:9: God is faithful and righteous to forgive those who confess their sin. God's faithfulness is his justice. To speak of God's righteousness is simply to speak of his covenant faithfulness or loyalty. Conversely, to speak of his faithfulness is to speak of his saving righteousness, or restorative justice. God promises to set things right. When he fulfills that promise, his righteousness is revealed.

So this pair of terms, faith and righteousness, are virtually synonymous within the covenantal framework of the scriptures. This righteousness-as-faithfulness is seen in Isaiah's description of Messiah's work of rescuing his people and judging them with perfect (yet tender) equity.

Messiah will have a belt of righteousness and faithfulness. This is how he's dressed.

But why a belt?

Belts were multi-symbolic in the ancient world; that is, they represented a number of things.

First they stood for royalty. Kings wore belts. Jesus is a king who rules in righteousness and faithfulness. A covenant-keeping king, loyal to his people, who fulfills his promises.

But belts were also symbols of warriors. A belt symbolized that you were ready and willing to fight, that you had no fear of the enemy. Like a black belt in Karate, one who has reached the highest level of expertise, so Jesus has a "black belt" in righteousness and faithfulness. He is ready for war. He is ready to enter the arena.

But perhaps more than all of this, belts were symbolic of victory. Champions wore belts. Unfortunately the closest thing we have to this today is professional wrestling (which is not at all adequate to portray what Isaiah means – you'd too easily picture Jesus as Hulk Hogan putting Satan in a half-Nelson). But think about it -- when a wrestler wins, he doesn't get a trophy or a crown, he gets a belt. That belt symbolizes his power and his might. It shows he has gotten the victory. That's what Isaiah wants you to see.

Is this how you picture Jesus? Does it match up with Isaiah's? As a victorious warrior-king, dressed and ready for battle? He is our champion and our victor. He's not a tame lion, as C.

S. Lewis said. He's good but also dangerous. He's the mighty Champion, the victor, the hero of his people. He fights for and defends his people. He is ready to take all challengers, ready to defeat all comers.

But as John Calvin said, the purpose of Christ's warfare is to obtain a peaceful kingdom. And that's what we see in verses 6-9, in one of the most familiar but also most misunderstood passages in all of prophetic Scriptures.

“ ”

Here we are told what the Messiah, the offshoot of Jesse, will accomplish by his coming.

Now it may appear at first glance that what Isaiah is describing here could only apply to the eternal state, after the final coming of Christ at the end of history, when his people have been resurrected and the whole creation has been glorified with them. And so we might then use this passage to answer questions like “Do dogs go to heaven?” Or, better put, “Will there be dogs in the new heaven and earth, the consummated new creation?” Romans 8 speaks of the whole creation groaning out for redemption, which will only be consummated when Christ returns. Only then will perfect conditions, conditions that mirror the Garden of Eden before the fall, be completely restored. Only then will creation be brought to mature glory.

If this passage were to be taken with absolute literalness, that would be correct, and in an ultimate sense this passage applies to the eternal state. That's certainly an application, or extension, of this text. It does help us answer those kinds of questions. We get a glimpse here of the cosmic scope of the kingdom, the cosmic scope of his redemption.

But I don't think that's what Isaiah chiefly has in mind. I don't think that is the primary way the prophetic passage is intended to function. In fact, Paul quotes from the verses right after this section and applies it to his ministry. So Isaiah is talking about the new covenant. That seems to be a better way of understanding how the prophecy works. Isaiah's prophecy points to eternity in an ultimate sense, but it is primarily directed to pre-consummational history in the present age.

But there's a problem with that too -- last I checked, not only were these animals not yet getting along with one another, but even dogs and cats still seem to be at odds.

The key is to understand that the prophets wrote quite often in symbols, in metaphors, in figures of speech. The symbols were drawn from the creation, or from the history of God's people. The prophets treated the creation, and the Mosaic law, and the great stories of redemption in the earlier OT, as a reservoir of images from which to draw in describing the future. Reading the prophets is often more like reading poetry than anything, and if we approach them that way we can save ourselves a good bit of confusion.

There are several clues that I think help us with this section. Again, the NT is an answer key to questions raised by these of texts.

First, the NT must always be our guide in interpreting the OT. In Acts 3:24, Peter is preaching and says, “All the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow [and that includes

Isaiah -- he followed Samuel], as many as have spoken, have foretold *these days*.”

In other words the OT prophets are usually – perhaps not always, but most often, as a general rule -- speaking of *these days* that we live in, what we could call the days of the New Covenant, the new Christian age.

Again, Paul confirms his by quoting from Isaiah 11 in Rom 15:12 applying it to his apostolic mission. Paul certainly saw Isaiah 11 coming to fulfillment in his day. He includes it in his catalog of OT texts coming to realization in his ministry among the Gentiles.

Then there's the fact that in Isaiah 11, the prophet is focusing on the coming of a branch, or a twig, or a shoot, from the stump of Jesse. This is a picture of humility. The final coming of Christ in power and glory is no where in view in this passage, even if it's a valid extension or application (since his final coming completes all that is prophesied here). What Isaiah has in view is what results from the first, not the last, coming of the Messiah. These are things his first coming set in motion.

And finally -- and this is the real clue -- in v. 9 we're told that these animals “will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” The animals are not in their native habitats but on God's holy mountain. At first glance, this is odd since some of these animals were unclean in terms of old covenant ceremonial law.

What is this holy mountain? It could only be Mount Zion, the site of the temple. But in the NT -- and again, we must always interpret the OT in light of the NT-- we find that the holy mountain and temple of the old covenant were types and shadows pointing to the new covenant church. In Hebrews 12, the writer says you *have come* to Mount Zion, the church of the first born . . .

Paul repeatedly refers to the church as God's temple, which means it is the Mount Zion of God as well.

What these verses in Isaiah describe, then, is the peace that Christ brings to his people. It's a picture of peace in the kingdom of Christ, in the church. The holy mountain is the church; the animals are Jews and Gentiles of various nationalities living together in peace under the reign of the promised Davidic king, Jesus Christ.

The peace of Christ and his kingdom is a major NT theme:

- The angels announced this at his birth, singing peace on earth and goodwill toward men on whom his favor rests (Lk. 2)
- Paul describes this in Ephesians 2 when he says of Christ, “He himself is our peace, having made Jew and Gentile one.” He brings clean and unclean together in one new family. He cleanses the Gentiles so they can participate together with believing Jews in the fulfilled covenant promises.
- Jesus said to his disciples before his ascension, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; but not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” Jesus gifts the gift of peace in our hearts – but that spills over into peace in the church's community, which in turn can even spill over into social peace, including

political peace among the nations. The gospel is the only valid basis on which we can reasonably hope for or expect world peace.

So, this theme of the peace that Christ brought runs all over the pages of the NT. This passage is a symbolic description of the peace the Gospel brings.

But let's ask ourselves a further question. What has to happen in order for a wolf to dwell with a lamb? What has to happen in order for a leopard and a goat, a calf and a lion, to all get along? What has to happen to the bear if it's to graze with the cow?

In each case, their characters, their natures, their desires must be changed. They must be converted, regenerated, transformed.

That's the point of this picture -- the only way there can be peace is if men have their natures changed by the Holy Spirit, working through the preaching of the gospel. Christ came to do this! He came to create friendship and community among men. The breath of lips -- Spirit empowered preaching -- transforms the world.

All other attempts at creating peace between men are in vain. There is no peace without Christ. Peace between family members, neighbors, races, classes -- whatever -- is impossible apart from the gospel of Christ. It cannot come through politics. It cannot come through military force, through power, through violence. Peace between men can only come through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. A stronger UN, better homeland security, nuclear disarmament -- whatever methods and strategies for attaining peace men might try, if they do not put Jesus at the center, they are fruitless.

No gospel, no peace. No Christ, no peace. And this is true at every level of society, in every relationship. Peace between family members, neighbors, races, classes is simply impossible if it does not rest on the foundation of the gospel.

Peace between spouses, between siblings, between neighbors, between nations -- it can only happen as the gospel is unleashed by the church. It can only happen as people are drawn into the Lord's holy mountain of the church to be taught and trained in the way of Christ. By nature all men are wolves and bears and snakes, who only want to tear one another apart from limb to limb. Only the preaching of the gospel can create "shalom." Only the gospel can create a community of friendship and peace. Only when the gospel touches their lives can they stop hurting and destroying.

Note an interesting feature of Isaiah's description. The animals are often used to represent nations and empires in the prophets (e.g., Daniel). But while the child (Jesus, of course) plays by the viper's den and the cobra's hole, the snakes themselves are nowhere to be found. Their homes are empty. This is a picture of the victory of Christ: Satan has been defeated, driven out, crushed and destroyed. Even a child may take possession of and play in the snakes' old habitats because the snakes have been smashed (Rom. 16, Heb. 2).

Let's unpack the meaning of these symbolic animals a little more. Animals are commonly used as symbols for men in Scripture. Think of the whole sacrificial system or the system of clean and unclean animals that symbolize different kinds of men (Lev., Acts).

But especially in the prophets -- and we should think here of a passage like Daniel 7 -- animals like these represent the Gentile nations/kingdoms. The wild animals which are not yet tamed/domesticated are the pagan peoples. Just as the first Adam had dominion over the animals in the garden, so the last Adam, the son of man/Adam, will have dominion over these beasts, the Gentiles. He will train them to make war no more. He will teach them his way of peace. He will disciple them through his church, inviting them into his holy mountain.

He will rule over the nations and subdue them and grant them his peace like a Master Trainer teaching his pets new tricks. Jesus will train the nations to live in peace with one another through the preaching of the Gospel.

Finally, we come to the end of verse 9, the climax. Isaiah says that in *that day* (the extended day of the new covenant – Acts 3), because of the Messiah's reign, the earth will be as full of the kingdom of the Lord as the water cover the sea. There will be another flood as in Noah's day – this time, not a flood of wrath/water but of grace/living water! This isn't universalism, but it does point us to the triumph of Christ's kingdom, to the wideness, to the vastness, to the expansiveness of his saving mercy.

God is gracious. He *delights* to save. And he will save an innumerable multitude. He will make his blessing flow as far as the curse is found. The world will be awash in the grace of God – as in Noah's flood, even the mountaintops will be covered will grace and glory!!

There's no way to cheat the prophet Isaiah. This is God's plan – his unstoppable purpose.

His prophecies are well on their way to fulfillment. Christ has already come. The branch has come forth from the stump. His kingdom is already established. The knowledge of the Lord has already begun to flood the world, with more on the way. Isaiah not only explains our past, he charts our future.

How should we respond to this prophet? What does it drive us to do as we contemplate its fulfillment in Christ?

I think there are three key ways to respond to this prophecy.

First, we should respond with joy. Yes, pure, unalloyed, exuberant, contagious *joy*.

We are the people of the Messiah. We are members of his kingdom. We are to rejoice in what God has done, is doing, and will do in Christ. He's saving a great multitude. We've been made part of that multitude, his new family, which will include sinners from every nation, tribe and language under heaven. We're the people of the new exodus. We've been rescued. We're now his agents, the instruments of his rod and breath, to further the growth of his kingdom in the world. The coming of Christ was the end of the world as they knew it – but it ignited the new world, which continues to grow and flourish down to our day.

We ought to overflow with joy at the greatness of our salvation, won by our victorious warrior-king. The curse has been driven away. The new creation is upon us. As we sing, joy

to the world, the Lord has come. Earth has received her king!

The second response is hope. Hope that is not easily quenched. Hope that keeps us afloat, that gives us buoyancy, during the storms and trials of life. Hope that drives us to expect and attempt great things on behalf of the kingdom. A hope that doesn't just look to eternity, on the other side of history, but that looks to a future still within the arena of history – because we know that God's purposes for the creation aren't near being finished.

Why have hope? Why respond with hope? God has fulfilled the promises made through Isaiah and the other prophets. He's kept the covenant with Abraham, Isaiah, Jeremiah, with David, with other old covenant saints.

But there's still more to come. We ought to rejoice in all we've been given. But we ought to hope for more. The best is yet to come.

There are still untamed wolves and leopards and bears and eagles that God has promised to domesticate. Not every viper den is safe. There are still areas of the world not yet flooded with the kingdom of God. The kingdom has grown from a tiny mustard seed to a pretty good sized tree -- but there's still more growth to come. We're still in the spring time of history – we're still in the growing season, a long way from the final harvest.

We are to be filled with hope for what God is doing in history, in the world around us. Too many Christians respond to the apparent diminishment of Christian influence in the world by turning inward. They focus solely on the church, as though the church community could be completely isolated from the world, or, even worse, they limit the scope of Christian hope to the personal growth of the individual. But this doesn't work. Isaiah says the nations will be transformed in history, and so they will be. Isaiah's prophetic message should inspire us with hope for the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

But not even that exhausts our hope.

Beyond that, there's the consummation of it all, when Jesus returns in his final coming, wipes every tear away, and defeats death finally and completely. We have a hope for history, but the best hope of all – the blessed hope – is the resurrection of the body and the glorious, perfected new creation. So we should be full of hope – hope for an earthly future and a glorious eternity.

We have so much to look forward too – something much better than anticipation for presents under the tree. *We should be like children during the month of December our whole lives* -- not in the sense of wishful thinking, but in the sense of a certain and sure expectation of things to come. The whole Christian life is an extended Advent – waiting with eager hope for the coming of the Lord. We really should live our whole lives the way children live through the month of December -- with that kind of joy and anticipation and hope and eagerness and enthusiasm and delight.

God has promised us something far better than anything in a box under the tree. He's promised us the world.

This hope is sure, it's complete, it's unbreakable.

You know, sometimes Christmas hopes don't get fulfilled.

You don't always get the Red Rider BB gun the way Ralphie got what he wanted.

But this hope will not disappoint. It is certain and sure. This prophet cannot be cheated because a sovereign God -- and now a sovereign God-man -- stand behind these prophecies.

And finally vision -- our third response is vision.
This passage gives us a vision for life, a vision for the church.

What is our vision as a church?

It's simple, really. In light of this passage, we can say this is our vision: To make this kingly Messiah known; to play our part in filling the earth with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Our mission as a church -- in conjunction with all the other true churches of Christ in this region -- is to fill the city of Birmingham with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. What a glorious vision!

Beyond that, our vision is to have some hand in filling the rest of the earth with the knowledge of God as well, through missions and church plants and helping to build Christian civilization throughout the earth. Nothing less than that will do.

Our church's vision is to fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord's glory, as completely as the waters cover the sea. And how fully do the waters cover the sea? Pretty completely! It's hard to find some part of the sea not covered with water! Our desire, our aim, our purpose, our vision -- is to fill the earth with the knowledge of God's glory that fully, that completely. We want to flood the world with the grace of God.

Nothing less.

Let's pray.