

The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation *The Book of Isaiah*

Ripples of God's Salvation: From Zion to the World *Isaiah 2:1 – 4*

Introduction: Jesus' Reign Rippled Out from Zion

When you drop a rock into still water, you can watch the ripples move out in beautiful circles across the face of the water. I want you to hold that picture in your mind because that is very similar to what happened when God came to earth in Jesus, over two thousand years ago. When Jesus launched his movement in Jerusalem with a few men and women, the ripples moved out in beautiful circles across the face of the earth. Little did everyone around them suspect that this movement would change the world. To the East, across the vast continent of Asia, Jesus' followers took his name, his kingdom, and his reign to Arabia, then India, where he challenged the Hindu caste system. All the way up to today, the state of Kerala, India, is home to many Thomas Christians who have high rights for women, high literacy rates, low infant mortality, and low inequality between rich and poor. Christian tradition says that Christian faith planted itself in Japan as early as 70 AD; we find that the largest and oldest Buddhist temple in Kyoto was built on top of a Christian church building, going back to the 500's, complete with Christian artwork and fragments of the Gospel of Matthew. We find a stone piece of cross in Vietnam dating back to the second century. It could have been a leading influence in China in 1400 had not the Mongolian Emperor Tamerlane converted to Islam and almost wiped out Christianity. To the South, across Africa, Jesus' followers took the name of Jesus and the reign of Jesus up the Nile River, to confront the powers of Egypt. In Acts 8, we find the Ethiopian eunuch reading the scroll of Isaiah the prophet; he comes to faith through the explanation of Philip, and then apparently starts Ethiopian Christianity, reinforced maybe by the apostle Matthew, and then in the fourth century by the missionary named Frumentius. Later, Christian missionaries took the faith further south to the mighty Nubian Kingdoms, in present day Sudan, which became a Christian kingdom that lasted for centuries until Islam took it over in 1276 AD. The impact of Christian faith here is the Nubian kings were no longer considered divine, two major kingdoms of Nobatia and Makuria merged peacefully under the influence of Christian reconciliation, and there was a fantastic literary culture in Nubia. To the West, across Europe, Jesus' followers spread to Asia Minor, then Greece and Italy to the renowned cities of Athens and Corinth and Rome. Tradition has it that Paul made it to Spain. The Berber people in North Africa became Christian. Augustine of Hippo Regius in Roman North Africa was part Berber. Missionaries went even to Britain and Ireland. Eventually, the Christian faith came further west. Native American chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe accepted Jesus as a man in his prime in the late 1840's, and Queen Liliuokalani, the last monarch of Hawaii, accepted Jesus as a child at around the same time. Then, to the North, Christian faith spread through the Germanic tribes, then to the Slavs through the missionaries Methodius and Cyril, then to the Scandinavian peoples in the snowy regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland. One of the achievements of Christian faith in northern and northwestern Europe prior to 1400 was the abolition of slavery.

Relevance

Now why is it important to remember that history? For two reasons. First, we need to be reminded of Jesus' love for every person in the world. He came to Israel and died and rose in Jerusalem so that his movement would spread from there. We are a movement of love.

Second, we need to be reminded that we are riding a wave. That wave started as a ripple way back when. It's important to play our part and respond to the Lord as He calls us. But lest we think that it all rests on us, or that we're doing all the work, it's important to remember that the Lord has been at work in this rippling outward since he came in the flesh over two thousand years ago. It reminds us not to be self-centered or ego-centric in our mission. For centuries, Western Christians thought of themselves as the epicenter of God's mission. That's changing now. And that's important, because God always wanted us to think about that differently.

Context:

We are going to look at a passage in Isaiah chapter 2, verses 1 – 4, which spoke prophetically about this beautiful rippling outward of Jesus' love across the world. We are entering into Advent today, and I thought that we at the Gathering could do something special and different this month. I'd like us to spend some time in Isaiah each week until Christmas, and a little beyond Christmas as well. Today, I'm going to teach from Isaiah 2:1 – 4 for only about 15 minutes. I do that as an introduction to Isaiah 1 – 6 as a whole. What I'd like you to do during this week is to

spend some time on your own in some part of Isaiah 1 – 6. Then when we meet again next Sunday, I'd love for us to share quickly and briefly what we learned. Then I'll summarize Isaiah 1 – 6 and introduce us to the next section of Isaiah. We'll do a few chapters a week.

So let me explain Isaiah 1 – 6 a bit more. The first six chapters of Isaiah function as an introduction to the whole book: 66 chapters long. Isaiah is stunning in his poetry and his vision. Tradition tells us that the prophet Isaiah lived, ministered, and wrote this in the 700's BC. Israel was divided into North and South, each with its own monarchy, but the line of David in the South, in Judah, being the true one. Isaiah seems to have lived through the Assyrian Empire swooping into the Northern Kingdom and taking it over. The sins of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had brought judgment upon it. Isaiah wonders what will happen to the Southern Kingdom of Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem.

The Honor of Zion: v.2b – 2d

In chapter 1, Isaiah says that he sees sin in the city. It is a shameful sight.

^{1:22} How the faithful city has become a harlot,
She who was full of justice!
Righteousness once lodged in her,
But now murderers.
²² Your silver has become dross,
Your drink diluted with water.
²³ Your rulers are rebels
And companions of thieves;
Everyone loves a bribe
And chases after rewards.
They do not defend the orphan,
Nor does the widow's plea come before them.

But in 2:1, Isaiah sees that God's destiny for this city is glorious:

^{2:1} The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
^{2a} Now it will come about that in the last days
^{2b} The mountain of the house of the LORD
^{2c} Will be established as the chief of the mountains,
^{2d} And will be raised above the hills;

Verse 1 sets the physical context and the focus. Isaiah is talking about 'Judah and Jerusalem.' Then verses 2a and 2b talk about the time and what will happen. 'In the last days,' refers to the days of the Messiah. I know that we as Christians tend to think of 'the last days' as the days before Jesus returns. Yes, that's fine, but from Isaiah's perspective, the last days began when Jesus came the first time. That's the emphasis here.

The 'house of the LORD,' built on Mount Zion, was important because it was considered to be a second Eden. Once upon a time, in the days of Adam and Eve, in a garden long ago, God dwelled with human beings. And God had empowered us to spread out over the whole creation and spread the garden and spread life. But we fell into sin and instead spread death. Sin and death rippled out from Eden. So God brought a new humanity – Israel – back into a new garden. He put His presence in a Temple on Mount Zion to dwell in their midst. But because God had always wanted to dwell in human beings, and not in a stone building, it was only partially successful. The Israelites continued to sin, even in Jerusalem, right on the other side of the stone wall separating God from them. And as a result, sin and death rippled out again from the second Eden, Mount Zion. This is what Isaiah is anticipating. Relative to him, it hasn't happened yet. But in Isaiah 1 – 6, he is seeing lots of sin in the city, and is seeing that it will happen. So from his introduction in those chapters, to the rest of this book, Isaiah explores that in detail. At first, he describes it frightening detail, and then, inspiring detail. There is a ripple of sin and death that will flow out from Mount Zion. But then, there will be an even bigger ripple of love and life that will flow out from Mount Zion, when the Messiah comes.

And what did Isaiah see would happen? Verse 2b, c, d: ‘The mountain of the house of the LORD... will be established... will be raised.’ Let me talk quickly about how to read biblical poetry. Biblical poetry did not really rhyme sounds. They rhymed ideas. So take lines 2c and 2d as a good example:

2c Will be established as the chief of the mountains,
2d And will be raised above the hills;

When I break it out that way, it’s easy to see what’s happening. The phrase, ‘Will be established’ (2c) is parallel to ‘will be raised’ (2d). The phrase, ‘As the chief of the mountains’ (2c) is parallel to ‘above the hills’ (2d). So to be established as the chief of the mountains is to be raised above all the other hills and mountains around. Not in a physical sense – because Mount Zion wasn’t very tall – but in the sense of being honored, in a relational sense. Mount Zion will be honored more than any other hill or mountain: more than Mount Everest for its towering height or Mount Rainier for its stunning beauty or Mount Washington for its friendly climbability.

The Reason – God’s House: v.2e – 3e

Mountains also symbolized authority and, for Israel, a place to meet God. It was a place of spiritual potential. Mount Zion is going to explode with spiritual influence and importance. How? The next few poetic lines describe why.

2e And all the nations will stream to it.
3a And many peoples will come and say,
3b ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
3c To the house of the God of Jacob;
3d That He may teach us concerning His ways
3e And that we may walk in His paths.’

Mount Zion is honored because who will come to it and how they will come. It’s like a Macy’s Day parade but with a real reason for a parade! In v.2e and 3a, ‘all the nations,’ meaning representatives of every people group, who are of course, ‘many peoples,’ will stream to it. But they will not come silently. In biblical poetry, the second line often adds a small detail that is significant. They will come with words, *good* words. They will ‘come and say’

Illus: This morning, I met with Miss Harriet. She told me that in January, she is going to go to Washington DC to see Obama give his reelection inauguration speech. It reminded me of four years ago, on that momentous day when Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States. I watched the Inauguration on TV but I wished I could be one of the people streaming to the Capitol Lawn in Washington DC. And at least for me and for others who celebrated Obama’s victory, there was much to celebrate and hope for.

But in the biblical story, people are not coming to be spectators. They are coming to be students. ‘That He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.’ In Old Testament times, all the way up to the time of Jesus, the Temple served as God’s throne-room and God’s classroom. God’s presence there was supposed to be ‘a house of prayer for all nations’ (Isa.56:7; Lk.19:46). And it was there, when you stood near God’s glory-cloud that rested behind the veil in the Holy of Holies, and heard the teaching from the Israelite priests about the wonder of God and the commandments of God, that you learned what is good and what the Lord expected of you. You learned who you really are.

In John’s Gospel, when a group of Greek people at the Feast of Passover ask to see Jesus, this triggers something for Jesus (Jn.12:20). Jesus says, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’ People were coming to Jesus to learn about God. They had heard about him, and recognized something of the presence of God in him. Jesus was greater than the Temple. And now that ‘the nations’ and ‘many peoples’ were coming to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, not to stand in the Temple building per se but to talk with Jesus, this vision from Isaiah was really being fulfilled. Fulfilled truly. The same thing would happen at Pentecost in Acts 2. All kinds of peoples drawn from all over the world were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. And the Spirit of Jesus comes in power and enables people to speak with power and praise. So Isaiah’s vision was fulfilled in an even fuller way.

God’s Reign of Peace from Zion: v.3f – 4f

But what would happen next? Can everyone in the world fit into a crowded little space on a small mountain? No. That's why after coming up and in, the people go out and declare what they have heard:

^{3f} For the law will go forth from Zion
^{3g} And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
^{4a} And He will judge between the nations,
^{4b} And will render decisions for many peoples;
^{4c} And they will hammer their swords into plowshares
^{4d} And their spears into pruning hooks.
^{4e} Nation will not lift up sword against nation,
^{4f} And never again will they learn war.

When the first son of David, King Solomon, sat on the throne, he ruled at first with wisdom and brought peace (1 Ki.3:16 – 28). But he still had a corrupted human nature, sinned, and his reign became deeply flawed, angering many, triggering secession of the ten northern tribes, and dividing the people of Israel into two nations. But the last son of David, Jesus of Nazareth, would ascend an even higher throne. He will unite 'the nations' (v.4a) and 'many peoples' (v.4b) as his kingdom is announced. And he will 'judge' (v.4a) and 'render decisions' (v.4b) – that is, he will declare what is just and true between people, even to the point of revealing the secrets of men's hearts.

As a result, in v.4c – 4f, when people come into his reign, he will bring peace. Isaiah lifts up the great dream that has echoed into our present day: of 'swords into plowshares' and 'spears into pruning hooks' or as some would say today, 'tanks into tractors' and 'guns into garden tools.'

Illus: humorous analogy – cleaning a room, and then cleaning the house

Now I know it seems like this is all still off in the distance. But it is happening now. And it's happening voluntarily. It's not that Jesus' reign would materialize all at once by force whether people wanted it or not. Jesus' reign is announced, and it must be voluntarily chosen out of love for him and love for truth. But once chosen, it does have this effect.

Illus: I just met with a freshman at Harvard named Alex. Justice, to evidence, to Scripture, to abolition of slavery, to human dignity.

Illus: Winona's love for Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* reflects a hope for swords being beaten into plowshares, a transformative healing