

AN ENSIGN OF THE PEOPLE

The Roman emperor, Caligula, ruled only four years, beginning in the Year of Our Lord Thirty-seven. During his short reign, he committed many acts of cruelty. On one occasion, when he presided over some games, he ordered his guards to throw a section of the audience into the arena to be devoured by the wild animals there. In the fifth century after Christ, Atilla the Hun ruled land extending from Germany to the Caspian sea. The Greek historian Crispus, who was acquainted with Attila, described him this way:

He was a man born into the world to shake the nations, the scourge of all lands, who in some way terrified all mankind by the dreadful rumors noised abroad concerning him. He was haughty in his walk, rolling his eyes hither and thither, so that the power of his proud spirit appeared in the movement of his body.

Matters did not improve after the so-called Enlightenment. In the twentieth century alone, Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, Adolph Hitler of Germany, and Mao Zedong of China, were responsible for the deaths of millions of people. Men are sinners, and so some men are wicked rulers. Not so Jesus Christ. He is perfect, Son of God and Son of Man, and His rule is perfect.

When Samuel was judge in Israel, the Israelites tired of judges, and they demanded that Samuel give them a king, as the other nations had kings. So, the Lord told Samuel to warn the people that a king would oppress them. The Israelites foolishly and impulsively rejected the righteous Lord as king, so they would get what they desired: unrighteous men.

The Lord gave to Israel Saul, who began his reign well enough, but progressed badly. Samuel told Saul that the Lord had rejected him as king, and sought a man after His own heart. (1 Samuel 13:14) When Samuel would anoint Eliab, son of Jesse, to replace Saul, the Lord disapproved, saying, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) The Lord chose David, a man after His own heart. David was a good king, because he was a good man. While David was king, the Lord made a covenant with him. He said.

And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever. (2 Samuel 7:12–16)

The Lord promised David that a man would inherit his throne, and that man would be, not only a son of David, but the Son of God Himself. Moreover, that man would rule forever in righteousness. David did have sons in his lifetime, one of whom was Solomon, but none was the fulfillment of the Lord's promise.

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was divided, and in the days of the Divided Monarchy, most of the monarchs were wicked, and so were most of the people. The Lord sent Isaiah the prophet to prophesy against the southern kingdom of Judah. The prophet said:

And the LORD have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof. (Isaiah 6:12, 13)

The Lord would hew down the great tree of Israel. There would remain a stump, and that stump would be burned. Nevertheless, that stump would remain vital. The Lord would send the Assyrian army to conquer the northern kingdom of Judah, killing many, and carrying away many into exile. The Lord would then send the Babylonian army to do the same to the southern kingdom of Judah. A portion of the people would remain in the south, but they would be subject to further judgment. In the end, however, the Lord would preserve a faithful remnant.

The Lord had a particular warning for the rulers of Israel. He said:

Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; To turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless! And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? to whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory? Without me they shall bow down under the prisoners, and they shall fall under the slain. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 10:1–4)

The rulers of Israel were tyrants. They ruled the people, not with justice and mercy, but with cruelty and oppression. They favored the rich, and unfairly treated the poor and needy. They preyed on the weak and helpless, like widows and orphans. The Lord asked them what they thought they would do in the day of judgment. When the Lord would punish them for their injustice, to whom would they turn for help? They did not rightly judge men, but God would rightly judge them. They failed to render justice, but God would not fail. He would render to every man according to his works.

The Lord warned His people of coming judgment, but, as always, He gave them hope. He said:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: 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 of the fear of the LORD; And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall

stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.
(Isaiah 11:1–10)

The tree that is Israel would be reduced to a burnt stump, but that stump, still having life in it, would produce a shoot, a young branch. This means that the Lord would, with the army of Babylon as his instrument, destroy many Israelites for their sins, but preserve a holy remnant. From that remnant, from the lineage of Jesse, father of King David, the Lord would bring forth a proper ruler for Israel. This would just be the fulfillment of the covenant the Lord made with King David.

The character of the Messiah would be unlike that of any other ruler, and the prophet gives a sevenfold characterization of the Messiah, seven being the number of completeness. First of all, the Spirit of God would rest upon Him, and so He would not operate independently of God, but in subjection to Him. Because the Spirit would rest upon Him, He would have wisdom and understanding, which is to say, He would understand men and their problems and their needs. He would insight into the mind and will of man. Because the Spirit would rest upon Him, He would have counsel and might, which is to say, He would know what to do in any situation, and have the power to do it. Because the Spirit would rest upon Him, He would have knowledge and fear of the Lord, which is to say, He would know the righteousness of God and His will, and, knowing the righteousness of God, would be obedient to His will.

The administration of the Messiah would be unlike that of any other ruler. The fear of the Lord will be a sweet savor in his nostrils. He would delight in the fear of the Lord, taking pleasure in doing what the Lord commands. He would judge, not by what He would see, or what He would hear. He would not judge by outward appearance, but by what is in a man's heart. Just as the Lord told Samuel not to look on a man's appearance, but to judge his heart, so would the Messiah do. He would defend the oppressed, the defenseless and the downtrodden. He would judge righteously and fairly. He would strike the wicked of the earth, not with a rod of iron, but with the rod of His word.

The word of the Messiah, His law, would go out to all the world. It would reach not only the Jews, but the Gentiles; not only the nation of Israel, but all nations. All the world, every nation on earth would know Him, and be in subjection to Him. Because the Messiah would rule the world righteously, and because the world would be in subjection to Him, He would give the world peace and prosperity. Conflict, strife, violence, would all come to an end, and all would be united under the rule of the Messiah. The Messiah would be a banner, a signal flag, to which every nation would look, and under which every nation would rally.

When Jesus was ready to begin His earthly ministry, John the Baptist first appeared, and preached to the people, saying, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2) Saint Matthew, in His gospel, commented that John was the one about which Isaiah prophesied when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (Matthew 3:3) The Son of God had come into the world, and He came to establish His kingdom. John the Baptist prepared the way for Him by announcing the arrival of the kingdom, and by calling on the people to repent of their rebellion and to submit to the new king. John was a prophet, and many Jews recognized him as such, and so they came to him to confess their sins and be baptized.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two prominent religious sects in Israel in the days of Jesus. The Pharisees followed oral tradition, but the Saducees did not. Saint Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, compared the two this way: "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both." (Acts 23:8) When they came to John to be baptized by them, John said to them:

O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (Matthew 3:7–10)

The Pharisees and the Saducces had their differences, but they had one thing in common: they were all hypocrites. They came to John to receive a religious rite, but without repentance. They did not repent, but believed they were right with God because they were descendants of Abraham. John warned them of coming judgment, and called them to repentance. Concerning his baptism, he said to them:

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:11, 12)

John baptized with water for repentance, but he told people to put their trust, not in him, but in one to come after him, one that was far superior to him. That one, John said, would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The water of John's baptism was symbolic of cleansing. The fire of the Messiah's baptism is also cleansing; it cleans by burning off dross, impurities. The Messiah would baptize Israel with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Those who yielded would be purified from sin; those who resisted would be consumed. As the Lord said through Malachi the Prophet:

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness. (Malachi 3:1–3)

And again, “For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.” (Malachi 4:1) In the days of Isaiah, when the Lord judged Israel, He left a stump, a righteous remnant. In the days of the Messiah, when He would judge the wicked in Israel, He would consume them with fire, and nothing would remain.

The one of whom John spoke he later identified as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the shoot that grew out of the stump of the remnant of Israel. He is the Son of God, and the Son of David, the heir to David's throne. He is the one who has established His kingdom in the world. He is the one who judges rightly, and who brings justice to the world. He is the one whose word is going out into all the world. He is the one who is bringing every nation into subjection to Himself. He is the one who is uniting all people under one banner.

As Jesus is Lord of the world, He commands all men everywhere to believe in Him, and to obey Him. He commands all men everywhere to unite themselves to Him, and so to each other. So, Saint Paul prayed for the Christians at Rome, and for all Christians everywhere, “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you

to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:5, 6) So Saint Paul, as an apostle of Jesus, commanded all Christians everywhere, “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.” (Romans 15:7) To achieve unity is difficult work, for, in this world, Christians still sin, and still err. Yet, Christ commands them to be united under Him. Saint Paul appealed to the prophets to prove that Jews and Gentiles, once mortal enemies, are now becoming united in Christ. He wrote:

Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust. (Romans 15:8–12)

This ought to give the Christian hope for unity, and joy and peace of mind. Although men always divide over something, their divisions have lessened over time as they become like-minded in Christ, and they will continue to be more like-minded until all think Christ’s thoughts after Him. Saint Paul wrote, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.”

Let us understand that human rulers are sinful. Let us believe that Jesus is an impeccable king. Let us be united under his banner.

Unto the Son who must reign, till he hath put all enemies under His feet, and unto Him that put all things under the Son, that God may be all in all, be honor and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.