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Triumph in Tragedy

If you knew a loved one was going to have a difficult go of it, what would you tell them? This was the world which Isaiah faced. He knew that his generation was going to face severe trial and difficulty. As such he wrote this epistle to prepare them for the crucible, specifically Isaiah 6-12.

In Isaiah 6-12 Isaiah introduces us to the “Immanuel Principle” specifically, out of the devastation of the sin and misery of this life, God preserves His own for He is always with them! That was the significance of:

- The child born in Isaiah’s day named, “Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).
- The child born of Mary 2,000 years ago who also bore the name, “Immanuel” (Matthew 1:23).

And, surprisingly, in Isaiah God deigned to append this title, “Immanuel,” to his people, two times!

Isaiah 8:8, “Then it [speaking of the flood waters of Assyria] will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through, it will reach even to the neck; and the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of

your land, O Immanuel.”

This appellation was used of the remnant of God’s people in Judah who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Because they were followers of God, they would reap in their lives suffering and difficulty, yet they would never be without the hope and promise that in and through all things, God was with them! The promise that “God is with us” means very little to the one living in wealth, luxury, and ease of days. Truly, for this assurance, this sign, to be of any comfort to the Christian, we must be in a crucible either on account of a bitter providence or the disciplining hand of the Lord. So when (not “if”) God brings one of His children there, behold the promise of God: God is with them! This is what the Immanuel Principle is all about! In fact notice Isaiah 8:10, Isaiah makes reference to “Immanuel” as a principle of living. Speaking to the child of God in need of the tempering grace of the Lord Isaiah said this:

Isaiah 8:10, “Devise a plan but it will be thwarted; state a proposal, but it will not stand [in our sinfulness many times we will do what we want, but in the end it won’t stand. Why? Notice how the verse ends, because of...] Immanuel/God is with us.”

In other words, the explanation Isaiah gives for the disciplining hand of the Lord is— Immanuel!

This was and is a crucial truth for all Christians. God loves us! As such, He will not allow us free access to our fleshly desires so as to fulfill our love affair with the world.

Hosea 2:6-7, “Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them, but will not find *them*. Then she will say, ‘I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now!’”

Now it might be tempting to conclude that the declaration of Hosea 2:6-7 was a one-time thing for the people of God. Yet Isaiah, in “principlizing” Immanuel, assures the genuine servant of God that it is not! Upon them has been set a sign which guarantees that God will never let them alone! Truly, “Immanuel” explains the difficulties which were about to come upon Judah and have yet to come upon us!

And yet “Immanuel” is but one half of the message that Isaiah gave to his generation in preparation for the horror that lay in front of them. The Messiah also is “The Rod of Jesse!” This is another important name which by way of application ought also to have an impact on our living.

The Rod of Jesse

As most of you know, in 931 BC the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the North which had wicked and evil kings, and Judah in the South which had both good and evil kings. The setting for our text finds us once again dealing with the Northern Kingdom and the Assyrians. Recall that on account of the wickedness of the Northern Kingdom, God raised up a mighty nation to punish Israel: Assyria.

- In 734 B.C. the kingdoms north of Judah sought to unite in order to form a unified front to withstand the threat of Assyria.
- Because the Kingdom of Judah under Ahaz would not join this coalition (on account of previously bad relations with the Northern Kingdoms), the kingdoms of the north endeavored to depose Ahaz and set up a king who would fight with them (Isaiah 7).

- Now in his rebellion and unbelief, Ahaz, the king of Judah, called upon the Assyrians for help—rather than God!
- In response to Ahaz’s plea, the Assyrians came and in 722 B.C. smashed Israel as well as the northern Kingdoms.

And yet Assyria wouldn’t stop with the destruction of Israel. In their lust for war, Assyria would continue south, eventually threatening Jerusalem, the City of God. During this time, there was a man by the name of Isaiah who served as a prophet of God in the southern kingdom of Judah from 740 BC to 681 BC. Having come to a profound and life-changing understanding of the otherness of God (Isaiah 6), Isaiah purposed in this prophecy to exhort the nation to an uncommon faith in view of their God! Yet who was/is their God? After describing Him as “Immanuel,” Isaiah purposed to introduce the nation to another important title, “The Rod of Jesse,” (Isaiah 11:1)!

The context of Isaiah (Isaiah 9:8-10:34) contains a description of the coming threat of Assyria. Chapter 9:8-11 picks up on the prophecy as though Isaiah was standing on the city walls of Jerusalem looking north toward Israel.

Isaiah 9:8, “The Lord sends a message against Jacob [i.e. His covenant people], and it falls on Israel [the northern kingdom].”

Literally this could be rendered “a word.” Sometimes God sends plagues and sometimes help. Here the Lord sends just a word, which was a prophecy of pending doom. Recall *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz!*

Isaiah 9:9a, “And all the people know it...”

The word “know” does NOT mean “recognize” (as if Isaiah’s message was understood) BUT “experience.” All the people of Israel were going to experience this coming doom first hand! As a nation, they would be wiped out, devastated, and destroyed!

Isaiah 9:9b-10, “...that is, Ephraim [which was the main tribe of the northern Kingdom] and the inhabitants of Samaria [the capital city, and hence the king. Now notice, if ever there was a people who needed the disciplining hand of the Lord, it was the Northern Kingdom...], asserting in pride and in arrogance of heart: ‘The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with smooth stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will replace them with cedars.’”

The kingdom of Israel’s response when confronted with God’s coming judgment on account of their sin was, “*Whatever God destroys, we will rebuild! In fact, we’ll make it even better than it was before, so what’s the big deal?*” Talk about pride!

Isaiah 9:11, “Therefore the Lord raises against them adversaries from Rezin, and spurs their enemies on.”

Ultimately this references Assyria. On account of the pride of his people, God raised up Assyria to humble them! Now, Isaiah 9:12-10:4 detail the punishment that the Assyrians would give to Israel. Get this, as heavy as the disciplining hand of the Lord would rest upon Israel, the northern Kingdom would not repent!

Isaiah 9:13, “Yet the people do not turn back to Him who struck them, nor do they seek the Lord of hosts.”

As a result, we read the recurring theme throughout this section.

Isaiah 9:12, 21; 10:4: “...in spite of all of this His anger does not turn away.”

In Isaiah 10:5-19 we read of a major shift. Here Isaiah details the punishment that God would send on Assyria on account of their pride!

Isaiah 10:12-13a, “So it will be that when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, *He will say*, ‘I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness.’ For he has said, ‘By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did *this...*’”

God raised up Assyria to be a tool of discipline in His hands. As such the nation was powerful and unstoppable. Yet this aroused a sense of national pride amongst the Assyrians such that the nation began to believe that all that they were was a testimony of their own greatness! In fact, God Himself was subject to them (cf. Isaiah 10:15)! Accordingly, after disciplining His people with the Assyrians, God would then turn His focus on Assyria to discipline it on account of its pride. Using the metaphor of a forest, Isaiah says that God would smite the mighty forest of Assyria such that a child would be able to count the remaining trees (Isaiah 10:18-19).

In Isaiah 10:20-34, Isaiah returns to the Assyrian army and their destructive approach to Jerusalem (which occurred in the days of Hezekiah, Isaiah 36:2a). Slowly, the Assyrians would conquer city after city. Isaiah describes the approach of the Assyrians as they blaze a path of destruction to Jerusalem. The cities mentioned here form a line beginning with Aiath and ending with Nob.

Isaiah 10:28-32, “He has come against Aiath [a city in the territory of Benjamin, about 30 miles NE of Jerusalem]. He has passed through Migron; at Michmash he deposited his baggage [a city about 7 1/2 miles away from Jerusalem]. They have gone through the pass, *saying*, ‘Geba will be our lodging place.’ Ramah is terrified, and Gibeah of Saul has fled away. Cry aloud with your voice, O daughter of Gallim! Pay attention, Laishah *and* wretched Anathoth! Madmenah has fled. The inhabitants of Gebim have sought refuge. Yet today he will halt at Nob [a priestly city of Benjamin in sight of Jerusalem]; He shakes his fist at the mountain of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem.”

If you were a child of God listening to this message, you would be filled with terror! It is one thing to have one’s property ravished by natural disaster: fire, tornado, flood, hurricane. That’s bad enough! But imagine knowing with certainty that in short order an army would race through Colorado raping, pillaging, and destroying? First Wellington would fall... then Ft. Collins... then Loveland... Longmont... Erie... and then Lafayette! ALL SOON WOULD BE DEVASTATED!

Such was the certain message Isaiah gave to His people. Once again, using the metaphor of a forest, Isaiah says that the Mighty Forest of David would be cut down by the approaching army of Assyria until nothing remained but a stump! But here, the threat of Assyria would end (Isaiah 10:33-34), for God would destroy the Assyrian army, a destruction which can be read about in Isaiah 38.

Isaiah 38:36-38, "Then the angel of the Lord went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead. So Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed and returned home, and lived at Nineveh. And it came about as he was worshipping in the house of... his god... his sons killed him with the sword..."

In 609 BC, God would bring about the complete and ultimate destruction of Assyria via the Babylonians!

The setting of Isaiah 11, next to the destroyed FOREST OF ASSYRIA- a forest now so small that a child could count the trees on account of the judgment of God (Isaiah 10:19) a picture of TOTAL devastation. This sets another forest, the forest of David, THE FOREST OF GOD! And though it also lay desolate on account of Assyria, nevertheless God would preserve life in the stump of one tree! In light of this context, notice our passage picking up on the "stump" that would remain.

The Messianic Hope

Isaiah 11:1, "Then a shoot [or a "rod"] will spring from the stem [or "stump"] of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit."

This is an incredible promise which is the difference between despair and triumph when difficulty descends upon us! Against the back drop of the terror, devastation, and destruction of Assyria, God would resurrect the decimated forest of His people! Yet notice the context of this resurrection: It is humble and obscure. That is the emphasis and focus of this verse.

The term, "stem of Jesse" is by the time of Isaiah the phrase, "House of David," stood for strength and power. In fact, everywhere else the imagery of Christ as a "branch" is used in the Bible, it is referenced as coming from "the house of David" or from "the Lord" (Isaiah 4:2; Jeremiah 33; Revelation 5:5; 22:16). Yet here it is, "Rod of Jesse." Why the change? And what is the significance? "Stem" or "rod of Jesse" pictures the same idea as "house of David" except for one thing: "Rod of Jesse" portrays the concept of humility. Jesse, the father of David, was of the city of Bethlehem which, at this time, was the most insignificant city in all of Judah!

Now as with "Immanuel", let's put Isaiah's message together and so apply it to our life. What is the significance of the Promise of the Rod of Jesse! A love relationship with God brings about a life of faith which most often will lead to humility and insignificance by world standards. Yet from this humble beginning, God is pleased to raise up a "rod/shoot" which would become a "branch" which throughout Scripture portrays the idea of a Kingdom!

Jeremiah 23:5-6, "'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'When I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, "the Lord our righteousness."'"

The Branch is the unstoppable and unthwartable Kingdom of God which returned to this world in Christ!

Zechariah 6:12, "...Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will

branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the Lord. Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the Lord, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices [i.e. the office of priest and king. IOW, this “branch” would be both a priest and a king].”

The “Rod of Jesse” becoming a “Branch” references the glorious promise of the Messianic Kingdom of God! And yet, we need not go far to understand the significance of “branch” in our passage. For Isaiah 11: 2-5 graphically portrays what the “Rod of Jesse” would do and thus be.

Isaiah 2-3a, “And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And He will delight in the fear of the Lord...”

Unlike the leaders of Israel and Judah, this “Branch” would be wise, powerful, holy- ever and always holding a reverence for the Lord.

Isaiah 11:3b-4a, “...and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear; but with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth...”

This “Branch” would exercise the office of an upright judge and so a King!

Isaiah 11:4b, “...and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist”

This “Branch” would be a Warrior-King!

All of these descriptions of what the “Branch” would be is NOT simply a description of the coming King, BUT also His Kingdom, since again the primary reference of “branch” in Scripture is that of a Kingdom (which includes the King, but also the people of His domain)! So what is the message that Isaiah intended His people to receive in this promise? Out of the devastation that most certainly was coming, God would raise up an unstoppable Kingdom of righteousness over which the Messiah would reign! That is the message of the Rod of Jesse!

The Significance of the Name on our own Lives

Once again think with me. The message of this passage, the promise of the “Rod of Jesse” means very little to the one living in wealth, luxury, and ease of days. Truly, for this assurance, this sign, to be of any comfort to the Christian, we must be in a crucible either on account of a bitter providence or the disciplining hand of the Lord. So when (not “if”) God brings one of His children there, behold the promise of God: Out of devastation God brings triumph/victory!

The people of God in Judah needed to hold on to this as they lived through the turmoil that awaited them in the coming years: war, famine, disease, hardship, destruction, and exile. We need to hold on to this as

well.

- At the time when Christ's Kingdom entered into this world, the forest of God was in complete shambles! The only faithful Servant was Jesus Himself... born in Bethlehem... in a manger!
- Yet from this humble beginning, God brought about His Kingdom purpose... and so this principle continues to be worked out in our lives today.
- In fact, this essentially was the message that Paul gave the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians... it is the message of the Rod of Jesse! In fact, I would suggest that this passage is the New Testament commentary on Isaiah 11!

2 Corinthians 4:7-11, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

Paul says three things.

1. God works out His redeeming grace in the context of impossibility that the glory and honor may rest with Him alone. Truly, God has chosen to store the balm of Gilead in bed pans!
2. As such, though many times life may find us
 - a. Down- we are never out.
 - b. Afflicted- we are not crushed.
 - c. Perplexed- we need never enter into despair.
 - d. Persecuted- we are never forsaken.
 - e. Struck down- we shall never be destroyed.
3. And what is the point and end to it all? Through it all God is pleased to "manifest the life of Jesus in our mortal flesh!" This is what the Rod of Jesse is all about! That is the Message that Isaiah gave his generation! That is a principle by which we must live as servants of the Lord!

From this we conclude that God's will for your life isn't to bring you to the point where you confess that Christ is all you need. Rather it is to bring you to the point where you confess that Christ is all you want!¹ That is where God was about to bring His people in the days of Isaiah. And that is where God in His grace continues to bring each of us in Christ today.

End Note(s)

¹ After suffering one devastating struggle after another, Paul was brought to this confession, "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). In fact, knowing Christ and having the life of Jesus manifested in his flesh was so important to Paul, he took upon himself the ministry and mission of the Rod of Jesse, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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