

“The Gospel according to Isaiah: A Son Is Given”

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Two weeks ago, I told one story of being in Louisville. Here’s another short one. In August 2018, I was in Louisville, taking classes. While there, I met up with a friend who used to be an associate pastor of a church in this area. He picked me up and we drove to dinner. As he was driving, I noticed something odd. We were passing a small public space, a little park space in the middle of a rotary that featured a statue of a man on a horse. The statue had some bright orange paint on it. It wasn’t painted entirely orange. That would be odd. But, no, it looked like the statue was hit with a balloon filled with bright orange paint. The paint had splattered on the statue and then dribbled down the statue.

Though I didn’t know who the subject of that monument was, I recognized what had happened. The statue was probably of someone who had served the Confederate Army in the Civil War. Louisville is sort of the gateway between the South and the Midwest, but it’s still on the southern end of the Mason-Dixon line. It has a southern heritage. And someone had dared recognize a man who had once been on the wrong side of the slavery issue. So, someone had recently decided to vandalize that monument.

It turns out that the statue was of a man named John Castleman, who helped found Louisville’s park system. He had also fought for the Confederate Army. He was recognized for his contributions to the city, but now people have decided that someone like that shouldn’t be honored, because his legacy is tarnished. His support of slavery stains his character more than bright orange paint. At least that’s what some people think.

Similar things have happened throughout our country. There has been a debate about whether we should continue to honor people who had once done wrong things or supported wrong causes. Do we continue to have statues and plaques and other monuments that honor such people? Or should those remembrances of things past be removed?

I understand why people are uncomfortable with honoring people who once supported slavery. The statues don’t exist to honor their contributions to slavery, per se. Still, they supported and even fought for that institution, and that makes us uncomfortable, because we know that slavery is a grave evil, and the institution of slavery in this country is one of the nation’s great sins.

Yet when this debate about monuments is held, I think about this: If we were to remove every statue of every person who ever did something wrong, which statues would remain? It's not hard to point out the errors, the flaws, and faults in people, especially those of different eras.

Think of Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer. He was a Catholic priest, monk, and professor who saw that what the Catholic Church practiced was contrary to what is in the Bible. He was a brave man who was willing to act, to call out this problem. He dared to translate the Bible into a language that the people of Germany could understand, which encouraged others to translate the Bible into the vernacular. (This was at a time when the official Bible of the Catholic Church was in Latin.) He was willing to die for the truth of the Bible. It's possible that we wouldn't be in this kind of church were it not for Luther. We owe him a debt of gratitude.

But Martin Luther wasn't perfect. He was known for his colorful language, often insulting people in memorable ways. There's a website called the "Lutheran Insulter."¹ You can visit the website and be insulted by Luther's own words, which are carefully cited. If you want to read another insult, you click "Insult me again."² We might laugh or blush at some of his language. But Luther also wrote some things about Jewish people who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, their King and Redeemer, and we would generally view the language he used as anti-Semitic. It's true that Jewish people who do not believe in Jesus are not God's people. They are separated from God by their sin. But the same is true of everyone who does not believe in Jesus. But Luther singled out Jewish people and his writings about them make us uncomfortable. And this brings up an awkward tension. Do we honor Luther for his positive contributions? Do we renounce his anti-Semitism? Do we do both?

And what of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was named after Luther? The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is regarded as a great hero of the twentieth century. He spoke out against racism. He advocated a non-violent approach to fighting against that evil. He frequently appealed to the Bible. He spoke and wrote eloquently. We should all be thankful for his work. He is honored in many ways today. Most major cities have a street named after him. There's a federal holiday named after him.

¹ <https://ergofabulous.org/luther>.

² After several clicks, my favorite is: "You should not write a book before you have heard an old sow fart; and then you should open your jaws with awe, saying, 'Thank you, lovely nightingale, that is just the text for me!'" From "Against Hanswurst," pg. 250 of *Luther's Works*, Vol. 41.

But was Luther perfect? Not at all. He received a PhD in systematic theology from Boston University. Many years after his death, when his papers were being collected and organized, it was noticed that significant portions of that dissertation were plagiarized. More importantly, King rejected major doctrines of the Christian faith. In papers he wrote at seminary, he doubted the doctrines of the Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus, salvation by substitution, and the second coming of Jesus. He said such doctrines were “contrary to science.”³ There is no evidence that he refuted those earlier positions. To reject the Trinity and the resurrection and salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus is to reject Christianity. You can’t be a Christian and believe they are simply myths. Additionally, there is evidence that King was a serial adulterer.⁴ How do we view this Luther? Do we continue to honor his positive contributions even while lamenting all his moral failures?

And it’s not just MLK. A couple of months ago, NPR had a story about Mahatma Gandhi, perhaps the most famous Indian who has ever lived. The story said that Martin Luther King Jr. visited the former home of Gandhi, in Mumbai. This was in 1959, eleven years after Gandhi was killed. King wanted to spend the night in Gandhi’s old bedroom because he could feel “vibrations of Gandhi.” (That, by the way, is something that a Christian wouldn’t say.) The article noted that this is the 150th anniversary of Gandhi’s birth. Such anniversaries invite closer scrutiny of past leaders. The story noted that a statue of Gandhi was removed from a university in Ghana last year, because he had once written some racist things, saying that white people in South Africa should be the predominant race, and writing some troubling things about black people. So, at least earlier in his life, Gandhi had held some racist ideas.⁵

We could continue to scrutinize famous people of the past, digging up dirt on their lives. Even the greatest human beings have been significantly flawed. Their reputations are stained by sin, by racist ideas, by personal moral failings. If we were to remove every statue of every sinner, there would be no statues left. Well, there would be statues of only one man, the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. Part of the reason why we celebrate Jesus’ birth at Christmas is because he was the only man who never failed.

³ Joe Carter, “9 Things You Should Know about Martin Luther King, Jr.” *The Gospel Coalition*, January 19, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-martin-luther-king-jr-2>.

⁴ Joshua Horn, “Was Martin Luther King Jr. a Christian?” *Discerning History*, April 17, 2018, <http://discerninghistory.com/2018/04/was-martin-luther-king-jr-a-christian>.

⁵ Lauren Frayer, “Gandhi Is Deeply Revered, But His Attitudes on Race and Sex Are Under Scrutiny,” *National Public Radio*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/02/766083651/gandhi-is-deeply-revered-but-his-attitudes-on-race-and-sex-are-under-scrutiny>.

This month, we're looking at passages from the book of Isaiah that explain Christmas, as well as the whole story of the Bible. In the first week, we looked at passages that show a big view of God. As the only true God and the Creator of the universe, there is no one like him. He transcends what we can understand completely. He is big, and we are small in comparison. Last week, we talked about the great problem that we all have: We are separated by God because of our sin. Instead of worshiping the one true God alone, and instead of living life on his terms, we worship other things, things that dictate how we live. We call those things, those false gods, idols. We are, all of us, failures, deeply flawed, stained by sin. If there statues of us, they deserve to be torn down.

If the story ended there, it would be bad news, because God cannot put up with such failure forever. Sin is rebellion against God. It is corrosive. It destroys his good creation. God would be right to punish and eliminate all sinners. But God is also merciful and gracious. He is patient. And God had a plan to provide the perfect human, the only one who has never sinned.

This morning, we're going to spend our time primarily looking at two passages from the book of Isaiah, a book that was written over twenty-seven hundred years ago, about seven hundred years before Jesus was born. Both of these passages express the hope that a son would be born who would come and make all things right.

The first passage is Isaiah 9:1–7. Before I read this passage, it's important to know a little bit of history. Isaiah was a prophet in Israel, in Jerusalem, at a time of unrest. The northern kingdom of Israel had separated from the southern kingdom, called Judah, about two hundred years earlier. In Isaiah's day, the super-power of the world was Assyria, and they threatened Israel. Also, the northern kingdom of Israel had partnered with Syria and they threatened Judah. In this midst of these foreign threats, the people of Judah needed hope that God would one day take care of their enemies, that he would cause his light to shine on people who were living in darkness. And Isaiah promises just that.

Here is Isaiah 9:1–7:

¹ But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² 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.
³ 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.
⁴ 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.
⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
 and every garment rolled in blood
 will be burned as fuel for the fire.
⁶ 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.
⁷ 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.

This passage begins by talking about gloom and anguish. Specifically, two places are mentioned: Zebulun and Naphtali. These were tribes of Israel, both of which were to the west of the sea of Galilee. These were areas that first fell to the invading Assyrian empire. They knew what it was like to be in anguish and gloom, as a foreign army overtook them. The people of the land were deported. Their land was divided into three Assyrian provinces. It was overrun by Gentiles, people who weren't part of Israel.

The basic idea here is that these lands that were once conquered will experience glory. The people who once lived in darkness will see a great light. The nation that was once beaten down and in despair will one day be filled with joy. The nation that was spoiled will one day divide the spoils of war. They will have victory over their enemies. They were once under the yoke of their foreign oppressors, but soon they will be delivered. God will break that yoke, as well as the rod of oppression. All the garments and equipment associated with war will be

burned up, destroyed. Earlier in Isaiah, we're told that there will be a day when the weapons of war—swords and spears—will be turned into tool used to farm—plows and pruning hooks (Isa. 2:4). There will be an end to war.

The key to this victory, to this light and joy and peace, is found in verse 6. A child will be born. Specifically, a son will be born. The government will rest upon him. God's kingdom will be ruled by him. And this special child, this son, will be called four names. The first is Wonderful Counselor, which refers to the wonderful, or supernatural, counsel that he will give. Unlike all of Israel's previous kings, this king will make perfect decisions because he is perfectly wise. He will never hold false views and give wrong advice.

He will also be called Mighty God. Now, it's possible that the Hebrew phrase behind that name could be translated as something like "Mighty One of God" or "Warrior of God." But in the very next chapter of Isaiah, the one true God is called "mighty God" (Isa. 10:21). It's likely that Isaiah's original audience thought that this son would represent God, but not actually be God. That's because they couldn't imagine that God would become a human being. That seemed impossible. Yet that is what Isaiah prophesied. Somehow, the child who will be born will also be God.

He is also called Everlasting Father. This does not mean that God the Father would become a child. We believe that God is one being in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. While they are perfectly united, it's important not to get these three persons confused. The word "father" can be used in nonliteral ways, the way that Catholics will refer to a priest as "Father." Obviously, he's not their biological father, nor is he God the Father, but he is viewed as a kind of leader, provider, and protector. And that's more or less how "Father" is used here. He will care for his family. He will lead them. He will provide for them. He will protect them. Unlike all the other kings of Israel, who not only lacked perfect wisdom and often weren't mighty or godly, this "Father" will be everlasting. His reign will have no end.

Finally, he will be called Prince of Peace. Perhaps the people of Isaiah's day were hoping only for political peace. That's what so many people want. Or, they want peace with family members, and perhaps some kind of economic victory. More often, we want these things plus a sense of internal peace, a peace in our souls. But that peace won't come unless we have peace with God. And that is ultimately what Isaiah is talking about. This child, this son, will bring real, lasting peace, peace with God, to his people.

Verse 7 make explicit some things I've already said. This child's reign and the peace that comes with it will know no end. He will reign on David's throne forever. David was the great king of Israel. But David was flawed. He had many wives, though God made marriage to be something that unites one man and one woman. Though David had multiple wives, he wanted more. He saw another man's wife, Bathsheba, and wanted her because she was beautiful. So, he took her. And she became pregnant. To cover up what he had done, David had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed. David certainly had his own sins. But this descendant of David would not be like David. He would reign perfectly. He would be perfectly righteous, always doing what was right. He would make sure that justice was always done. There would be no corruption in his administration. And God would make all of this come to pass: "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this."

In short, Isaiah is promising victory for those who were defeated. He is promising peace and joy to those who were apart from God and despairing. He promised light to those who were in darkness. All of this would come through this special son, who would not only be a descendant of David, but also Mighty God himself. Because he is God, he will reign forever.

This promise that God made through Isaiah would probably have seemed a little hard to believe twenty-seven hundred years ago, when Israel was divided and partially defeated. And it's hard to believe now, that there would be a perfect leader, particularly when we consider that even the greatest of men have their sins. But that is what God promised.

The promise continues in Isaiah 11. Look at Isaiah 11:1-5:

- ¹ There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
- ² 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 the fear of the LORD.
- ³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
- ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

This prophecy of Isaiah is about the same child. He would come from the “root” of Jesse, who was king David’s father. And from this root would come good fruit. That’s because the Holy Spirit would rest upon him, and the Holy Spirit would give this king wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and a fear of the LORD. When we talk of “fear of the Lord,” we don’t necessarily mean being afraid of God. It’s more like having a healthy respect for God. Unlike the kings that came before this king, this king would be perfectly wise, perfect in his understanding and knowledge. Wisdom, the knowledge of how to live rightly, comes from the fear of the Lord (Prov. 9:10). This king would be a good king because he would live for God. This king would take care of the poor. He would defeat the wicked. He would always do what is right.

If you take a look at all our political leaders, such a leader sounds too good to be true. Imagine if we were told we would have a president who would be like this. We couldn’t imagine that happening. All our presidents seem foolish or proud or conceited or wicked. They lack true fear of the Lord. But not this leader.

We’re also told in Isaiah 11 that this leader would bring about real, lasting peace. Look at verses 6–10:

- 6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
- 7 The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.
- 9 They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰ In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Some of that language is a poetic way of imagining real peace. Imagine a wolf living peacefully with a lamb instead of wanting to devour it. Who could imagine a young child leading dangerous and wild animals? Who could imagine an infant or a toddler laying safely near snakes?

Yet God promised that this king, who comes from Jesse's lineage, would bring about such peace. This king will put an end to destruction and harm. In fact, he will cause the whole Earth to be full of the knowledge of God. People from all the nations of the Earth will come to him.

These passages sound too good to be true. But they are true, and they are about Jesus. He is the offspring of David who will reign forever. He is the only one who is perfectly wise, perfectly righteous, perfectly just. He is the only one who has perfectly worshiped and honored God the Father. And one day he will bring about perfect peace on Earth.

We know these passages are about Jesus because only he could fulfill them. Also, Matthew, who wrote a biography of Jesus, quotes the beginning of Isaiah 9, saying that Jesus fulfilled that passage by visiting the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali (Matt. 4:13–16). Only Jesus is both a son who was born and also Mighty God. He is the only perfect leader, the only perfect man, the only perfect human being who has ever lived.

At Christmas, we celebrate his birth because it is a miracle. The eternal Son of God, who has always existed, became a human being. God is not like us in some important ways. God is eternal. We have a beginning. God doesn't have a body; he is spirit. We have bodies. God is omnipresent. We are limited to one space, as well as one time. God is perfect. We are not. How can God become a human being and still remain God? It's hard to understand, but this is by no means impossible. We know it's not impossible because it happened. Jesus is God the Son, and he added a second nature to himself. He is one person with two natures, one divine and the other human. He was and is truly human. He has a body. He was born. He ate and drank. He became tired and slept. He had a full range of human emotions. He felt pain. He suffered. He died. Jesus is truly God but he's also truly human.

Part of the reason why Jesus came is because every other human failed to live as they should. We may not have written racist statements or committed adultery or murder, but we have all failed to love God and live for him. We have failed to keep God's moral code. If we're being honest, we have to admit that we've failed to keep our own moral codes. But Jesus has never failed. He's not selfish. He can't be bought or sold.

And not only has he always done what is right, but he's always held the right ideas. He's not racist. He hasn't advocated for the oppression of innocent human beings. His theology is perfect.

And he's perfectly wise. He's clever. He knows the right thing to say. Even in the midst of persecution and pressure, he always said and did what was right.

You can't see all of that by reading these two passages in Isaiah, but if you look to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you can see that. We have been studying Luke's Gospel, and we'll finish it next year.⁶ You can learn more about Jesus by reading those Gospels. We have almost all of the sermons on Luke available online. If you don't know Jesus yet, I urge you to read about him. Read his words. Consider his life. Only he is perfect.

The reason why he needed to be perfect was because God wants and even demands a perfect human being to covenant with him. In the end, God can only dwell with those who aren't corrupted by sin. Jesus lived a perfect human life in order to fulfill God's righteous demands.

But Jesus also came to die. I'll talk more about this next week, when we talk about how God saves his people. But for now, it will suffice to say that Jesus came to pay the penalty that we deserve. Though he was and is perfect, he was treated like the worst criminal. If we're to think about statues, it's like this: Jesus let his statue be destroyed so that statues of corrupted men and women wouldn't be torn down. That's metaphorical, of course. The fact is that we deserve to be torn down, condemned by God, removed from his good creation. Jesus didn't deserve that. But he came to take that penalty for us. And he also came to give us his righteousness.

But what of all the talk of Jesus reigning forever and defeating enemies? The truth is that Jesus didn't come to do all of that, at least not when he first came to Earth. But the promise is that though he returned to heaven, he will come again to bring about perfect peace on Earth. All who trust in Jesus, who willingly come under his rule, who properly fear him, who believe that he is the only one who can make us and the world right with God, will live with God forever in a perfect world. All who reject Jesus will be judged and condemned. They will be cast out and remain in darkness forever. When this happens, the world will be recreated. There will be no more hurt or destruction in God's creation. The wolf shall lie down with the lamb. The knowledge and glory of God will cover that new Earth the way the waters cover the sea.

The only way to have that promised peace, to have a place in that perfect world, is to trust in Jesus. Every other leader who has ever come and gone is flawed and failed. We're all a mixed bag of good and evil. But not Jesus. He is the only one who never failed. Receive this gift that God offers by putting your trust in him.

⁶ See the sermons on Luke available at <https://wbcommunity.org/luke>.