

From the Root

The Prism of Sennacherib

In 1830 an archaeologist named Taylor working in the ruins of the ancient city of Nineveh, unearthed this six-sided clay prism, inscribed on all sides with cuneiform writing. When it was translated, they realized that this was the personal account of Sennacherib, one of the most powerful monarchs in the history of the world. Sennacherib was the king of Assyria who besieged Jerusalem in 701 BC. On his prism Sennacherib boasts and brags of his many military victories over city after city after city. Then he says, I shut up "Hezekiah the Judahite" within Jerusalem his city "like a caged bird."

But then, for some unstated reason, Sennacherib and his vast armies left the Jerusalem walls unbreached to return home to Nineveh. It's one of the great mysteries of history. Why didn't Sennacherib enter the city? After all, the conquest of the city was what he *clearly planned* to do? The mystery is solved by. . .

The Scroll of Isaiah

At this same time, 700 years before Christ, Isaiah the prophet is living in Jerusalem. Standing on the walls he can see the armies of Sennacherib draw near. Assyria is the great world power, and Isaiah himself had foretold that it would be God's instrument to bring judgement on his unfaithful people. (Isa 8) This was a terrible time. Yet Isaiah had also prophesied the birth of a child, Immanuel who would rule on David's throne. (7:14;9:6,7) so there was hope yet for them.

But Hezekiah the king is in the Temple pouring out his heart in desperate prayer. He has no military option. He is doomed. In a world where "might makes right," he has lost.

Then the word of the LORD comes to Isaiah:

"Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: 'He shall not come into this city, Nor shoot an arrow there, Nor come before it with shield, Nor build a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, By the same shall he return; And he shall not come into this city,' Says the LORD. 'For I will defend this city, to save it For My own sake and for My servant David's sake.'"

Then, during the night, the angel of the LORD slays the Assyrians, one hundred and eighty-five thousand – in the morning, they're all dead and *Sennacherib the mighty king of Assyria slinks off with his tail between his legs back to Nineveh,* " (Isa 37:33-38) where, according to the book of Kings his sons . . . struck him down with the sword. . .(2 Kings 19:37)

This was the last recorded mention of Sennacherib, the powerful Assyrian monarch who once ruled the world. So here's two different versions of same story: the prism of Sennacherib, the scroll of Isaiah. Every student of history knows that sometimes. . .

You can't see the forest for the trees

Human culture is a thriving forest where people yearning for life, reach up, looking for a

place in the sun. The forest is diverse and changing all the time. And sometimes “civilization” harms the forest, breaks its sacred rules, destroys it and leaves it scarred and unhealthy. Sometimes the forest is well managed by its human occupants. Or we try and “help” the forest *too much* -- not allowing natural fires to take their course and burn away the dead-fall, and eventually the forest answers back with one colossal fire-storm that brings the forest back to its natural balance.

In Isaiah chapter 11, the people of God are mighty trees in the forest – The kingdom of God is a living organism with branches and leaves and roots. God has given it life, but it grows in an environment in which there are real threats to its very existence. The kingdoms of this world are invasive species that seek dominion over the earth, compete with the kingdom of God to take away its light and its nourishment. But a prophet like Isaiah can say to his people, “Climb to the top of and we can see our future.” A prophet like Isaiah also says, “Look at our roots – where we have come from, the soil in which we grow. Feel the change in the earth.

Isaiah has been called “the Bible within the Bible”. Many prophecies of the Messiah are found in Isaiah. It was obviously one of Jesus’ favorite books, since he quoted from it often. In fact every major theme found in the entire Word of God is somehow already present within Isaiah: the judgment upon immoral and idolatrous people. But also the message of hope of a Messiah coming as a Savior and a Sovereign to bear a cross and to wear a crown.

From Isaiah’s perspective, human culture is not simply the forest, it is . . .

Crown Land

Before we look at chapter 11, let me read 10:33-34 to put it into context.

Now, remember, in the days of Isaiah, the Assyrian Empire is invading closer and closer to Jerusalem. So Isaiah employs the highest of poetic language. He gestures towards the forests of Lebanon and says, “Look!” You see doom. You may see the invading armies of Sennacherib, but the eye of faith can see standing right there a Paul Bunyan-like figure, a gigantic lumberjack who is “the Lord God of armies.” And with his mighty axe, the nations are falling like trees in the forest. He’s opening up a clearing in the forest is to make room so that one majestic tree will flourish and rise unhindered towards the Sun. This one tree is God’s city, God’s chosen dynasty of David. So behind the dreaded march of armies, is a God who decides what trees will fall, who clears out the underbrush, piles it up and burns it. This forest is crown land. He can do that, and he knows what he’s doing.

Jesus said, “My Father is the Gardener.” Same idea. In Isaiah’s vision God is the divine Forester, pruning, thinning, burning away brush as part of a forest management plan which has Jerusalem as its focus and centre.

But by the time the Assyrian armies under Sennacherib withdrew, Jerusalem was left like a stump in the middle of a clear-cut. The approach to forest renewal had to be radical. The result was not a pretty sight. But out of that stump, the chosen stump would grow . . .

A Shoot from the Root

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”

In those troubled days of Isaiah, when the Divine Forester was trimming and thinning and purging even the “family tree of David” from which Jesus the Messiah would come needed to be chopped down. It was reduced to a stump by the chastening judgement of God. But the Good News is that God can bring life from death and victory from defeat.

The New Testament is the defining book for the Christians, And it begins with a family tree that was important to the Jews as well as the Christians because this genealogical record connects our story to a much, much older story.

God planted a *tree* in Eden. Adam and Eve disobeyed and were pruned out of the garden and cast into the world of sin and death. Adam's story is *my* story, it's *your* story. It's how we all alienate ourselves from God. But the *root* of the tree doesn't die. This family tree grew into Abraham, the father of the Jews though whom God promises restore his blessing to all nations. But more specifically, the tree grew into *David* and Jesus is the Son of David. So God is promising this "stump" that a great deliverer king would come from David's family tree.

Isaiah is telling the story about how we all are our own worse enemies. The spiritual tree, the tree of life that is the family of God, is constantly being pruned. But this "shoot from the root" is a king and a Kingdom. It is that family tree we find at the beginning of the New Testament. And it grows like a . . .

Redwood Cedar

[slide] This is an example of a "fairy ring." Each of these Redwoods sprouted from the same old stump. Each of these trees is an identical clone with exactly the same genetic material as the others and the stump. The Redwood is kind of a unique tree in that it can reproduce both sexually and asexually. In other words, the Redwood can either grow from seed or it can sprout from the root, crown or stump. If a Redwood fall in the forest, it will regenerate a row of new trees along the trunk. This is why you will see many Redwood trees naturally growing in a straight line. The sprouts grow when the main adult stem starts to die. Each sprout will develop its own root system, forming a ring of trees around the stump of parent. This ring of trees is called a "fairy ring."

Isaiah's vision takes us back again to the original "Tree of Life" which continued to be represented in Israel, by the sacred lampstand called the *menorah* which stood in the Temple. The menorah was stylized in the shape of a *tree* to symbolize the life-giving power of the eternal, unseen God. This stylized tree that stood in the Temple represented *God's unseen presence* among his people. And the Menorah had *seven branches* each one holding a flame. So when Isaiah talks about *the Branch* (and the arms of the Menorah were called branches), he is talking about shoot from the root Jesse (David). And he is saying that in that branch is the genetic code of life that only God's Spirit can impart to those who know him. This "Branch" carries the spiritual DNA that the church must have to reflect the fullness of God in this world. The spirituality of God's people has a . . .

Genetic Code

To continue my extended tree metaphor, the birch tree does not have the Redwood's DNA. The Oak does not have the Redwood's DNA. So none of the other kingdoms of the world had the spirituality of the kingdom that grew from the root of Jesse. What distinguished the royal line of David from the kingdoms of the world, was the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Of the Messiah he says:

"The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD."

Reaching back down through the roots to the dawn of time, right up to days of Jesus and

then forward through time from Jesus to this very day, we believers have at least the *potential* of possessing what the apostle Paul calls “the *mind of Christ*”. Followers of Jesus, like their master, can be endowed with the sevenfold Spirit. This is:

1. The Spirit of the Lord – the Creator God, the Sovereign God of the Universe.
2. The Spirit of Wisdom – the spiritual use of knowledge for right purposes.
3. The Spirit of Understanding – it is rational, able to think and come to conclusions.
4. The Spirit of Counsel – the humility to seek wisdom in the community
5. The Spirit of Might – transcends the crooked little hierarchies of worldly force and domination.
6. The Spirit of Knowledge – it knows there is always more to know tomorrow and the next day.
7. The Spirit of Fear of the Lord – an awe and submission to a holy God who can only be worshiped.

So from this Branch would grow a whole new forest. Not just one tree, but . . .

The Peaceable Kingdom

Isaiah foretells that descendent of Jesse, the Messiah, a righteous ruler, will bring justice to all. His reign would be a reign of peace, he would be the Prince of Peace (9:6). And that peace would be so encompassing of all human culture that the effects would extend even into the animal kingdom. Everything is changed by the advent of this Messiah– the *environment* -- the very "order of creation."

We don't know all the details of the final fulfilment of biblical prophecy at the end of the ages. But I don't for a moment think that Isaiah was envisioning some future “Paradise on earth”. Some painless utopia. He was far too practical a man for that. Isaiah looked around at the suffering of his own generation.

Isaiah lived at a simple time in which most people lived in simple huts with mud floors, people and animals all crowded together in close quarters. This was a world where sometimes babies got born in the same room as the sheep and goats. And snakes – the snakes were everywhere, but they kept the rats under control, (and that's a good thing) but snakes posed a constant threat to the little children crawling on the floor, sleeping on the straw. This was the world for most people.

But it was those little villages that were the backbone of the society. The kingdoms could not exist without them. But in times of war and famine and drought, the king in his nobles in their mountain fortress, could survive. But the villages were open and vulnerable. As they say, in times like these, it's hard to keep the wolf away from the door.

But Isaiah had a vision: if something could change at the *top*, not just one regime toppled and replaced by another much the same as the old, but a different system entirely, one based not on force of arms, the mighty over the weak, but one based on compassion and love and justice. If *that* could control the palace, then the fantastic scene Isaiah describes of peace on earth was entirely possible. The snakes would be so busy chasing fat rats through the burgeoning grainfields they would bother the children and the wolves would be so busy chasing down the deer they would leave the sheep alone.

“And a little child will lead them.” It wouldn't take a strongman with armies and spears and swords and bows and arrows to rule a society like that. The Messiah and the messianic community would have a social conscience and a passion for justice. And *that* would be what ruled.

So Isaiah didn't believe in utopia, but if we can't have a perfect world, then at least we can have *better world*.

But this leaves us with a vast, gapping question:

How does this kingdom come to earth?

How could this kind of kingdom ever overthrow kingdoms of this world? Here are some statistics. They are twenty years old, but that makes them all the more staggering:

“The cost of developing one missile could feed 50 million children, build 160,000 schools and open 340,000 healthcare centres. The cost of a single nuclear submarine is equal to the total educational budget of twenty three developing countries in the world where 120 million children have no school they can go to and 11 million babies die before their first birthday.” (R. Eisler, The Chalice and the Blade p 195)

Our future is written either one of two places: on Sennacherib's prism, or in Isaiah's scroll. What we lack is a social guidance system, a set of governing values, a peaceable kingdom that would redirect this world's resources. How does this kingdom come to earth?

It doesn't come by yet another conqueror with his spears and swords and arrows. Another Sennacherib. It doesn't come with violence and force.

It comes from a shoot from the stump of Jesse. It comes with a little baby born in the village with the sheep and goats. It comes like a Redwood forest as a single tree falls to the ground and dies and gives life to the forest. It comes when the little baby born in the village grows to manhood, dies on a cross and is resurrected again to life.

It comes when the One Branch, gives life to all the branches and grow, all with the same DNA. That kingdom comes to any community, any village, city, metropolis or nation, or global culture, if only enough people in that any community, village, metropolis, nation or global culture have the Messianic DNA. If only enough people could see that our very survival as a species depends not more of the weapons of power but on lifting up the poorest and weakest on earth until we reach. . . .

The Tipping point

A mature Redwood forest is what is known in ecological terms as a *climax community*. That is an ecological term for a community of plants and animals which, over time over time has reached a steady state. This balance is reached because the climax community is composed of species *best adapted* to average conditions in that area.

An *old growth forest* is one that has attained great age. It's full of large live trees, large dead trees, trees falling down, trees giving life to new ones. Old growth forests have many layers of vegetation, a wide variety of tree species and age classes.

But if there's a fire in the forest, or a clear-cut, the forest that grows up afterwards is called a second-growth or a *regeneration* forest until a long enough time passes that the effects of the disturbance are no longer evident. *And this may take anywhere from a century to several millennia.*

Two thousand years ago a Branch fell to the ground and died and then rose to give us life. And the community he left behind by it's behavior can attract and win over and include the widest variety of people. the curious outsiders. Talk about a challenge to our lifestyle and our efforts at evangelism! But we have the right DNA. From the Root.