

“The Increase of His Government,” Isaiah 9:6-7 (December 6, 2015)

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. <sup>7</sup> 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.

## PRAY

It is the Christmas season, and we obviously take these Sundays in December to reflect on the first coming of Jesus Christ into the world: Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, who is very God of very God who took on flesh into the world.

We are looking this week and next week at a couple of prophecies from the book of Isaiah, and today we are in chapter nine. The larger context of this part of Isaiah is that God is telling his old covenant people, the people of Israel, that judgment is coming. The people of Israel have rejected God and his worship, and so a great enemy from the east is coming – the Assyrians. They will come and almost completely destroy everything in the land. That’s chapter eight of Isaiah.

But in chapter nine the tone of the prophecy changes. One day far in the future, the prophet says, there will be no more gloom, no more pain, for those in distress. Why? Because a child will be born, the child named Jesus. The child called Immanuel. And this child will be no ordinary child because he will one day establish a government, a kingdom, on earth unlike *any government the world has ever known*.

Now, what does this government that Jesus will establish have to do with you and me? Why can we see it as good news for us?

Four points: first, the gentleness of Jesus’ kingdom. Second, the supremacy of Jesus’ kingdom. Third, the safety of Jesus’ kingdom. Fourth, the way into Jesus’ kingdom.

First point: the gentleness of Jesus’ kingdom. Consider the symbols of some of the great kingdoms of the world – the lion (Britain), the bear (Russia), or the eagle (us) – when Benjamin Franklin wanted the national symbol of the United States to be the turkey, he was laughed out of the room. Why? Because everyone knows that you don’t choose a ridiculous looking animal to represent your kingdom – you choose an animal with pride, with majesty, with power, with fierceness.

And you would think that when Jesus, God in the flesh, came to earth to usher in his kingdom, the ultimate kingdom, that he would appear as a mighty conqueror, a general, as some sort of Titan, a king who you dare not cross and would force the people of the world into submission. That makes sense, but what Jesus does makes *no sense*. When

Jesus comes to earth to establish his kingdom, he comes as a baby. That's what Isaiah says, "For unto us a child is born..."

Now, is there any creature on the planet less threatening, and more necessarily gentle, than a human baby? Say you were taking a shortcut through a vacant lot and found just about any creature lying in some weeds and making noises, you'd be careful – if you saw a snake, you'd be careful. If you heard a dog whimpering, even if you like dogs, you'd approach it carefully, because it might be rabid, it might bite you. Even if you saw a kitten, you'd be careful because it might bite and scratch you. Certainly, if you saw a grown man lying in the weeds, you'd be really careful, *because what's a grown man doing lying in the weeds?* Is he on drugs? Does he have a gun?

But if you were walking through a vacant lot and heard a baby cry, you'd probably run to find the baby, pick him up and comfort him. God became a baby to establish his government. What can that tell you? *His kingdom must be gentle.*

Now, if that's true of Jesus' kingdom, of the government he establishes, then it must be true of his citizens. Friends, if we claim to be citizens of heaven, citizens of Christ's kingdom, we must be gentle. Never harsh, always patient, always kind.

It's so tempting when you come across someone in your life who is difficult to get angry and blow up and say, "You know, I've got to show them who's the boss. They need to know I mean business." Or, even more so, with our kids, we think it's our job as parents to toughen them up, so we need to be severe with them, and they'll learn to obey me the first time, every time and then they'll also be ready for the "real world" when they leave the home.

Now of course we cannot allow the difficult people we meet to run our lives; it's not loving to allow people to sin against you, to walk all over you. And we must teach our children obedience. *But never harshly – always with great patience, kindness, and humility.* Because, Christian friends, how did Jesus come to us? Did he tower over us, the way we are sometime tempted to tower over our children, get red-faced with rage, and scream, "Don't you ever do that again?" No, he came as a baby, as gently, as humbly, as patiently as he possibly could. We are called to gentleness, friends – in just about all the lists of the fruit of the Spirit in the New Testament you will find gentleness listed among them. Christian people are to have a gentleness that is evident to everyone – that's Philippians 4:4. And in Matthew 11 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Gentle, yet ...

Second, the supremacy of Jesus' kingdom. Verse 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." This planet has had over its history many, many kingdoms. At the beginning of the twentieth century the most powerful empire, kingdom, on earth was the

British Empire – it was famously said that the sun never set on the British Empire because her possessions were all over the globe – yet by the end of World War II, Great Britain was basically finished as a world power. She still exists, she’s still an ally of the United States, but she’s just a shadow of what she once was.

If you are my age or older, then you remember the great enemy, the kingdom we feared, was the Soviet Empire – a mighty empire that ruled half of Asia and most of Europe and had an ally just off the coast of Florida in Cuba. You might remember movies like “Red Dawn” and it seemed a distinct possibility that our country could go to war with the Soviets and lose. But, twenty five years ago or so, the countries she ruled in Europe and the various Soviet Republics threw off the yoke of Moscow, and while Russia is still a powerful nation, the Soviet Union no longer even exists.

And friends, if the Lord tarries long enough, someone will see the end of the United States. The United States, as wonderful as it is to live here, as blessed as we are to be a part of this country, is not a kingdom without end – it will end, all earthly kingdoms must end. Each one always thinks theirs is the last, but it never is.

But the Bible says one kingdom will be the last, that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. His government always increases, it never stops, never ceases to grow. Of the increase of his government there shall be no end.

I love the account of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream from Daniel 2. If you remember, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has a dream of a giant statue, representing all the great kingdoms of the world – the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, the Roman empires. The head of the statue is made of pure gold, and the chest and arms are made of silver, the mid-section made of bronze, and then the legs of solid iron. And all these kingdoms look so powerful.

But then a stone not cut with human hands appeared, and it crashed into the statue, and broke it all to pieces. In fact, it smashed the statue so completely that the bits of gold and silver and bronze and iron were worn down until they were just dust, and then a wind came and blew them all away. Even the memory of these mighty kingdoms gone – they all came to nothing.

But the stone, we read, grew, it increased, until it became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. What is this stone? He is the rock of ages, cleft for you, cleft for me – the Lord Jesus Christ, and of the increase of his government there shall be no end. Jesus’ kingdom will never end; therefore, it is supreme.

Third, the safety of Jesus’ kingdom. If Christ’s kingdom is supreme, then it must be safe for its citizens. One thing governments must do if they are to be worth a flip is to provide for the safety and security of its citizens. Today the , American citizens wonder, “Is our government able to provide for my safety?” We all agree that a government that cannot protect its citizens isn’t worth much.

So, here's the question: does Jesus' government keep his people safe? And at first glance a lot of people would say, "No, it doesn't." It's tempting for many people to say, "Look at all the Christians in the persecuted church around the world who have suffered so horribly. Look at all the Christians in the United States who have suffered – wasn't one of the victims of the Planned Parenthood shooting in Colorado last weekend a pastor? By all accounts a godly man?"

I read a really good story over Thanksgiving at an online news site I frequent; the story was written by a woman who was very thankful for her family, and what her family meant to her, and the wonderful memories she had about Thanksgiving. And then, I made the mistake of scrolling down and reading the reader comments under the article. One comment was by a pastor, who wrote: "Thank Almighty God for the family He gave you. He NEVER makes a mistake." In response to that, another person, who is also a minister (but not of denomination that believes in the authority of the Bible, I might add), wrote: "Lovely sentiment, Pastor [that God never makes a mistake]. Do you say that to folks who have families that are abusive or neglectful? God chose this life of beatings or molestation or burnings with cigarette butts or being locked in a cage? Not the God I believe in."

Now, you have to get past the bitterness and the spitefulness (the non-gentleness), but, you know, she does have a point. Those kinds of things do happen, and they have happened to believing Christians. Can we with a straight face say that life under the government Jesus first established at Christmas keeps his people safe?

I'll say two things in response: *first, the Bible does not promise that God's people will avoid all suffering, but that God will keep his people safe through it.* No, the Bible is in fact clear: God's people will suffer, and will at times suffer greatly. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you [or, the fiery trial you are suffering], as though something strange were happening to you." 1 Peter 4:12. Pain will come, suffering will come, hurt will come for God's people.

But Elisabeth Elliot makes a distinction in some of her writings which has been very helpful to me. She distinguishes between hurt and harm. Hurt is not the same as harm. She quotes from Psalm 91: Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—<sup>10</sup> no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.<sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.<sup>12</sup> On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. Psalm 91:9-12. No evil will happen to you, you won't even stub your toe. But then she rights this: "Yet the Bible [then] tells many stories of what is humanly called disaster striking God's own people. A careful reading of the biography of Joseph shows many terrible things happening to a good man [slavery, unjust imprisonment], but the outcome reveals the care and love of a sovereign Lord throughout. Corrie ten Boom's godly father died in a concentration camp during Hitler's reign, and her sister starved to death, yet Corrie never doubted the love or the loving purpose of God. They were not delivered from the evil of the Nazis, but they were *kept* – kept in God's arms, kept in

peace. No harm, in the eternal sense, ever touched them. In his time the pattern of his working will be unfolded.” Psalm 34:7: “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.” Jesus does not promise his people a life free from suffering, but he will deliver, he will keep, he will sustain his people through it.

If you’re here today and not a Christian, if you’re skeptical about Christianity and you’ve thought about it for a long time, then I know that explanation doesn’t answer all the questions. To you, it probably sounds like a dodge. I know that. But ...

*Second, Christmas, if it means anything, means our God knows what it’s like to suffer.* I think I’m on safe ground in saying that the reason God became a baby in Jesus Christ is so that he could experience suffering.

John Stott once wrote this: “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross ... I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us, [and o]ur sufferings become more manageable in light of his.” Christmas means God knows what it’s like to suffer.

Have you suffered? Christmas means that God knows what it’s like to suffer. God doesn’t turn away from us in our suffering, he *identifies with us in our suffering*. Have you experienced physical pain? Nothing like Jesus – first of all, he lived in an era without any kind of pain medication. But on top of that he experienced the most brutal form of execution ever devised – crucifixion.

Have you been betrayed by someone? So has Jesus – he was betrayed by his government, the authorities who were set up by God to protect him plotted to kill him. He was betrayed by his friends: Judas, who conspired to get him killed, the rest of his friends, who fell asleep on him in his hour of greatest need, and Peter, his closest friend, who denied even knowing him.

Do you feel forsaken by God? Do you feel like God has abandoned you? We often feel that way, we often don’t experience the joy or peace of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But we are never abandoned like Jesus was. On the cross, when Jesus died, God did actually abandon, forsake Jesus, and Jesus literally fell into a spiritual abyss. He experienced hell on earth when he died on the cross. *Christmas means that God knows what it’s like to suffer.*

Fourth, the way into Jesus' kingdom. If you ask, "Why in the world would God become a baby, who would grow up into a man, so that he could experience such unimaginable suffering on the cross?"

The answer can be found in Hebrews 2:10: "For it was fitting that he [referring to God, in heaven], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory [that's us], should make the founder of their salvation [that's Jesus] perfect through suffering."

Why would God become a baby in Jesus Christ and suffer? *Because we need to be saved.*

For every government that has ever existed, that government has had enemies who have wanted to see it destroyed. In fact, the stronger the government the more enemies it had. And Jesus' government is no different. *But no one will see Jesus' government destroyed, because of the increase of his government there shall be no end.*

Yet for those are determined to be his enemies there shall certainly be a horrible end. Jesus tells a parable near the end of his ministry about a man of noble birth who went to a distant country to be made king of that country, but the people there hated him and didn't want him to be the king. Yet he was made the king anyway, and so the man returns home.

At the very end of the parable, Jesus talks about those who did not want him to be king, and this is what we read (Luke 19:27): "<sup>27</sup> But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here [*bring them hither* – AV] and slaughter them before me."

Matthew Henry about Luke 19: "Utter ruin will certainly be the portion of all Christ's enemies; in the day of vengeance that shall all be brought forth, and slain before him. *Bring them hither*, to be made a spectacle to saints and angels. *Bring them hither*, that they may see the glory and happiness of Christ and his followers, whom they hated and persecuted. *Bring them hither*, to have their frivolous pleas overruled, and to receive sentence according to their merits ... Whoever will not be ruled by the grace of Christ will inevitably be ruined by the wrath of Christ."

You ask, "Who are these enemies of God?" And the answer is: us. We have sinned in word, thought, and deed, we have broken God's law, we have hurt one another and ourselves, and God is just, so he will punish all wrongdoing. We do not want him to be our king, to rule and reign over us. And we need to be saved from God's wrath because of it.

Now, I know, there are a lot of people here this morning who are just fine with the idea that God will one day judge and pour his wrath out on his enemies. In fact, I've had people come up to me after the service mad at me because I didn't talk about it enough, basically accuse me of not being faithful to the Scriptures. Some of you are thinking, "Really? People have said that to you?" Yes, and right after the service. While that isn't

necessarily a good idea and can be a sign of something unhealthy, most of the time it's completely understandable. I say that because these folks usually have been in churches where the minister never wanted to talk about the wrath of God on sin (which is something the Bible clearly teaches) and they are so frustrated by their previous pastor's lack of faithfulness to the Word of God they want to make sure it never happens again.

But I also know that some of you this morning feel like you're pretty far from ok with the idea of God's wrath on enemies. But you know what I think I can show you? *You still feel the guilt of someone who deserves God's wrath, whether you acknowledge being an enemy of not.*

We all feel guilty, all of us. Some of us feel guilty because we know we've hurt people, we know we've really blown it with some people. And for others, you don't feel guilty so much because of what you've done, but because of what you haven't done. Some of us feel guilty because we are not making the Christmas season as special and magical for our children as we feel we should. That's ridiculous, obviously (I mean, where it is written we must do that?), but some of us do feel guilty for it. Others of us feel guilty because we are not doing enough at work, or at home, or with this or that relationship. We're not going out and murdering people, but we feel guilty. We feel like we don't measure up.

I was reading yesterday about a man who, when he was teenager, had a father who basically had a little booth at a consignment shop, and he asked his son to go and look after the booth one afternoon, and the boy refused. He never forgave himself for that. Years later, after his father died, he went back and found the booth and stood there for two hours in a vain attempt to get rid of his guilt.

**Friends, to be human is to feel guilty.** And you will never on your own get rid of the guilt. You can work, and work, and work, and work, and I promise you will still feel the guilt. ***But Christmas means God came to earth to save you from all that.***

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—<sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup> For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” Romans 5:6-10.

Every government in world history has enemies. Who are the enemies of the United States? ISIS? Russia? Islamic terrorism? If you're a Republican, you might think it's the Democrats. If you're a Democrat, you might think it's the Republicans.

What do we do to our enemies? *We try to destroy them, get rid of them, so they no longer threaten us.* But Jesus does not try to destroy his enemies. **Instead, in Jesus God became a baby and put himself into the hands of his enemies.** Do you see that? God

made himself as weak, as vulnerable, as helpless as he possibly could and placed himself in the hands of his enemies.

You say, “That’s crazy.” Yes, from every human point of view, what God did at Christmas makes absolutely no sense. But it’s the only way God could let his enemies into his kingdom. We hate our enemies; God loves his. Jesus Christ came and lived a perfect life – he never made a false move, he did everything perfectly. And he did it *for you*, he did it *as you*. Then he turned his life over to his enemies so that they could kill him. The good news of Christmas is that even though we will never measure up, Jesus did it for us, in our place, and *because Jesus came to earth as a real, human baby who grew into a real, human man* God accepts Jesus’ life and death as if it were our own.

***Now, here is the question: do you believe that good news? Do you believe in a God who would do that for you? Do you believe that Jesus life and death serve as a substitute for you? That’s all it takes to get into this kingdom.*** And it's the only way to get over your guilt. You can never atone for your sin. You can never go back to the consignment shop booth and make up for how you let your father down years ago. Only Jesus is strong enough to handle your guilt. Only he has the shoulders for that work.

Verse 6: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulder.” Friends, only Jesus is **strong enough** to bear the weight of your guilt on his shoulders and pay the price for your sin. But only Jesus is **gentle enough** to love his enemies, to stoop down and bear the cross we deserve so that we could be reconciled to God. “Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die.” All we have to do is trust in Jesus. PRAY