

THE ROOT OF JESSE

ISAIAH 11:1-2, 10

“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. 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 in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious.”

This past week England’s Prince William and Princess Catherine paid a visit to America. And we rolled out the red carpet... William was treated to an audience at the White House. They both visited the new 9/11 memorial.

Will and Kate even took in an NBA basketball game where they met JayZ and Beyonce, as well as our very own *King... King James*. LeBron gave their little prince, George - the future British monarch - a replica Cleveland Cavaliers jersey - with his name stitched on the back.

Wow, how times have changed!

Just 250 years ago *another Prince George* was hung in effigy in the streets of New York. That King George was America’s public enemy #1... I guess we’ve always had a *love/hate relationship* with the British monarchy.

And this seems to be God's attitude toward Israel's infatuation with a *king*. It too was a love/hate *thing*...

On the one hand, God hated the motive behind the idea of a king. Rather than trust God, the Jews wanted to be like other nations, and follow a king they could see.

Their first king, Saul, was a concession to their lack of faith. And Saul was a disaster. Under his reign Israel lost land to the Philistines. Saul ended up falling on a sword.

On the other hand, the second King of Israel was handpicked by God. The Bible calls David, "a man after God's own heart." God delighted in David. Like all men, David had his flaws, but he was a man full of faith.

After God rejected Saul, the Prophet Samuel was sent to the house of Jesse to select the king's replacement.

And Samuel should've expected a surprise, especially after God told him the criteria to use for his selection...

"Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him." Saul was all about appearance and physical stature. "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Jesse called all his sons together for the big interview. Samuel went down the row, waiting on God's nudge.

When none of Jesse's seven sons pass muster, the Prophet asks the old man if these are all the candidates.

Jesse replied, “There remains yet the youngest, and there he is, keeping the sheep.” That’s when the Lord told Samuel, “Arise, anoint him; for this is the one!”

1 Samuel 16:13 describes the really cool thing that happened next, “Samuel took the horn of oil” - think a quart or more of olive oil... “And anointed him in the midst of his brothers” - He turned it up and poured it out on David’s head. The kid brother was to become king...

“And the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward...” From then on, God’s presence and power clung to David like that thick, gooey olive oil.

It’s interesting, this anointing with oil became the Israeli oath of office. Our newly elected President puts his hand on a Bible. A new King in Israel was anointed with oil. A ram’s horn brimming with olive oil was poured over his head. It was a symbol of God’s Spirit.

The king would need the Holy Spirit to govern wisely.

All of Israel’s future kings went by the title, “**The Anointed One.**” God *hated* the initial reasoning behind the Jews request for a king. But He *loved*, and blessed, and anointed the One He had appointed to the role.

In a sense, a “*horn of oil*” begins the Christmas story.

We drink egg-nog or apple cider - or put peppermint cream in our coffee - but the true Christmas libation is olive oil. Christmas began with the anointing of David.

As Isaiah puts it, a root was picked from the stem of Jesse. The Spirit of God came upon a new Branch in mankind's family tree. We trim an evergreen tree to start our Christmas. But God also trimmed a tree. He selected the family tree of Jesse and trimmed it with a promise.

At the time David took the throne, the war-mongering Philistines were on the rampage. They'd invaded Israel from the west, and had expanded their territory from the coastal plain into the mountains - the heart of Israel.

But David delivered God's people. He drove the enemy back to the sea, and unified the Hebrew tribes.

David took Jerusalem as his capitol, and built himself a palace. 2 Samuel 7:1 sets the scene, "The LORD had given him rest from all his enemies all around."

That's when one day, as David was strolling along the portico of his exquisite palace, He surveyed Jerusalem's skyline, and he noticed an inconsistency.

The King was carrying out his affairs of state in *a palatial mansion*, while the worship of God was being conducted in *a rustic tent... It just wasn't right!*

David understood that the true God overflows the heavens, but His abode on Earth - a tent - was not in keeping with His glory. *A few animal skins on top of bronze poles didn't cut it.* David thought, if the idols of the nations around him had magnificent Temples dedicated in their honor, *why not the God of Israel?*

When foreign ambassadors visited Jerusalem - what was called, *the holy city* - they saw *the king in a palace and God in a pup tent?* It was an insult to the Almighty!

David wanted to build God a Temple. But when he asked for permission God refused. David was *the king*, no less, yet God still denied him a building permit!

David *purchased the property, quarried the stone, cut the cedar, gathered the gold, recruited the artisans...* he made all the logistical preparations...

Yet God said, **"No,"** to David building Him a house.

Instead, **God promised to build David a house!**

This is amazing... *and it's just like our gracious God!*

David wanted to do God a favor, but instead God does him a favor - and more than just *a personal favor*.

God's promise to David will change the course of history and rescue Earth from the clutches of Satan.

For God promises David, not *a literal house*, but *a political house* - **a royal house** - a dynasty of David's descendants who would rule God's people forever.

Realize, Saul's son had died with him in battle. But David would not only see a son succeed him, God looked out into the future, and assured King David that he would always have a son sitting on his throne.

Today, when we speak of the British monarchy we call it, **"The House of Windsor."** Well, God promised David that Israel, and

eventually all the universe, will be ruled over by a member of **“the House of David.”**

How’s that for trimming a branch on a family tree!

It was the Prophet Nathan who delivered this news to David. In 2 Samuel 7, **“The Lord tells you that He will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”**

A seed from David’s body - a flesh and blood heir - a son - will reign over Israel and build God a Temple.

In verse 14 God speaks of the special relationship He’ll have with Israel’s King, **“I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took *it* from Saul, whom I removed from before you.”**

God stripped the kingdom from Saul and gave it to another, *but not so with David’s heirs*. God will chasten them when needed, but never completely reject them.

The immediate fulfillment of this promise was David’s son, Solomon. When David died, Solomon succeeded him on the throne. The new king was the wisest and richest man of his day. He built God a glorious Temple, and God made Israel great among the nations.

But it didn’t take long before **“the House of David”** needed the correction God promised in the covenant.

Toward the end of his life, Solomon strayed from God. He trusted in his wealth and multiplied foreign wives - 700 wives and 300 concubines. Which makes you wonder, *How did the wisest man on Earth end up with 1000 mother-in-laws? He wasn't being so smart!*

And Solomon's pagan wives led him and the nation of Israel into idolatry. And this was just the beginning of their downfall. After Solomon it was a slippery slope.

Of the 39 kings who would rule Israel and Judah, over the next 345 years, only eight would make any attempt to obey or seek the one, true God. From the *wicked Ahab* to the *evil Manasseh* most mocked God.

And according to the covenant, God disciplined *the house of David with a series of spankings*. When the kings strayed too far from God's Law, God would raise up a foreign army to attack and subjugate His people.

The final blow came in 586 BC when the armies of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, eventually sacking the city, and burning Solomon's Temple to the ground.

It wasn't just a trimming - God severely pruned Israel's family tree - down to a *"root"* - a mere *"sprout."*

In Isaiah 10 God compares the demise of Judah with the fall of another great kingdom, *the Assyrians*.

And Isaiah speaks of it as the clearing of a forest.

In verse 33 Isaiah writes, *"Behold, the Lord, the LORD of hosts, will lop off the bough with terror; those of high stature will be hewn down, and the haughty will be humbled. He will cut down*

the thickets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon will fall by the Mighty One.”

This implies some *serious tree trimming*.

I gained a new appreciation for the imagery Isaiah uses here after having some trees taken down in my back yard. And I'm talking huge trees - really tall trees.

I wanted to see how the guys would go about such a colossal task - so I got an iced tea, took a seat on the deck, and just watched. It was an amazing experience.

First, the climber heads up the tree, lopping off limbs as he goes. When he reaches the top all that's left is a naked stick of wood. Then he comes back down cutting five foot slices. When they fall, the logs slap the ground hard. It sounds like thunder. The house shakes.

It's amazing that trees so mighty and dominant are suddenly no more - the once tall trees are nothing but stumps. This is what happened to Assyria and Israel...

2 Chronicles 36:15-16 tells us, “And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place.

But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy.” What sad words, “*there was no remedy.*”

God tried to warn His people, but they were in too deep. To wake them up now will take drastic measures. *Enter the Babylonians*, God's instrument of judgment!

2 Kings 25 tells the sad story of Zedekiah, the last Jewish king. You could say the last full limb on the tree.

After capturing Jerusalem, the Babylonian general murdered Zedekiah's sons before his very eyes - then he plucked out King Zedekiah's eyes with a hot iron.

The last site the king saw was the slaughter of his own sons. Zedekiah was chained and taken to Babel.

There the Jews spent 70 years in *Time Out*, before God allowed His people to return to their homeland.

There is a military strategy called "[Scorched Earth](#)."

The invading army destroys everything its enemy might be able to use to survive. Crops are burned, wells are poisoned, railroad tracks or airports are demolished. Even potential soldiers are exterminated.

This was Stalin's strategy against the Germans in the Second WW. It was the Union General Tecumseh Sherman's plan on his infamous March to the Sea.

And this more or less describes the tactics used against the Hebrew kingdoms in the 6th century BC.

Imagine, your property burnt to a crisp. The green turf is now black. Shrubs and bushes have nothing on their branches. The only trees are now charred timber.

This was the spiritual landscape facing Israel.

When Jerusalem was sacked, the Temple burned, Zedekiah tortured and captured - many of the Jews despaired of the promises God had made to them.

But thoughtful Jews remembered Isaiah 11:1, “**There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.**” Under the surface of all this devastation and bleakness there was hope.

For just below ground level there was a root still alive, still growing, getting ready to break the surface.

Underneath all the devastation, and heartache, and loss there was a green shoot of promise. It wasn't even a *limb*, just a *stem*. But it was alive, and growing. *It was coming.* The fire was unable to stop this sprout.

Everything else was charred to a crisp, except that root. It was moist and green. This was a stem that nothing could kill. This was the indestructible branch.

Remember God's promise to David - his sons would be *disciplined*, but never *deserted*. God said, “**Your house and your kingdom shall be established forever.**”

God even used a personal pronoun. He said specifically, “**I will establish the throne of *His* kingdom forever.**” *Check this out... the stem was a Him!*

There were faithful Jews who still held to the promise God made to David - that a shoot would grow from his stem, a branch from his roots - **a seed from his loins** - who would be *an eternal king over an eternal kingdom.*

And guess what they named this promised King?

As heir to David's throne, surely God would anoint Him just as He did David. He would use a horn full of oil! Thick, gooey olive oil *was headed for His head.*

Thus, the Jews called this much anticipated, eternal King, **"The Anointed One."** In Hebrew it's **"Messiah"** - the Greek is **"Christos"** - in English, it's **"Christ."**

Realize, when you're adorning your Christmas tree this year, Christmas is the story of God *trimming a tree.*

It's about a family tree that gets pruned due to its own sin - pruned to its root - but that root returns. The little stem that was left comes back and sprouts again.

Christmas is about the tenacity of God's promises. **His relentless intent to fulfill all He promises to you!**

A Callery pear is a full-foliaged tree with beautiful white blossoms. One such tree had been growing near Building 5 of the World Trade Center since the 1970s.

But like all the trees in the area, the explosions of September 11, 2001, and the collapsing towers buried the tree under a mountain of metal, debris, and rubble.

A month later a clean-up worker found the tree. It was smashed and pinned between slabs of concrete.

The top of the tree had been lopped off. The rest of its eight foot trunk was burnt and charred. Its roots were broken. The tree had only one living branch.

Initially, folks thought there was no hope for the pear tree, but the Ground Zero crew asked a Parks employee to give it a chance. It was taken to a nursery in the Bronx. The folks there were equally skeptical.

But once the charred bark was cut away, and the roots trimmed back, and the tree was planted into rich soil, it started to grow. It was given a name, **Survivor**.

Yet this Survivor Tree was still to be tested. In the Spring of 2010 a storm with 100 mph winds ripped the tree out of the ground. Once more, the nursery workers questioned whether it would make it. Somehow it did.

Today, **The Survivor Tree** is part of the 9/11 Memorial in New York City. Some people actually objected to its inclusion, for it's unlike every other tree in the park. It's ugliness *or uniqueness* sticks out. In addition, it was planted so that its traumatized side faces the public...

But to me and others, **The Survivor Tree** is a vital symbol. It's doggedness reminds us that the roots of freedom and courage can never be extinguished.

And that's what Isaiah is saying of God's faithfulness when He refers to Messiah as the one green stem that rises from the ashes. He is the *root of Jesse* that can be *trimmed*, but never *killed*. *And that root is coming!*

When all hope seems lost - *after the enemy has charred, and blown through, and broken, and crumbled what we might've valued* - God's promises never fail!

God has a Man - *a King, an Anointed One, a Messiah* - who's well rooted to stand up to the storms.

Yet with every promise there comes a challenge, *and that's the waiting...* Imagine, waiting 600 years - six centuries for the Christ. That's how long God waited for Jesse's root to sprout - for *a descendent to ascend.*

After the Babylonians dethroned Zedekiah, no other son of David dared to rule over Israel and the Jews. *After Malachi even the voice of the prophets was mute.*

The period following the Babylonian exile leading up to the first century was known as **"The Silent Years."**

It reminds me of the times in my childhood when I watched the Apollo space missions - *the moon shots.*

It was exciting to follow the lunar landings on TV.

But there was always a communications blackout on their reentry into the Earth's atmosphere. It usually lasted 3 to 4 minutes, but it felt like an eternity. **"This is Houston, do you read me?"** *Then a very long silence...*

Those 4 minutes felt like 4 hours... *just waiting...*

So, imagine a 600 year communications blackout.

That's how long it took for *Promise believers* to regain visible contact with a descendant of David.

If you had just been looking on the surface - *above ground* so to speak - you would've wondered what had happened to God's promise to David. The spiritual landscape in Israel was charred, bleak, barren, burnt.

The royal tree had been reduced to *a root, a shoot*.

But God had not abandoned His promise. A root grows **underground**. God was working, “**below the radar**.” God went **off the grid** to build His kingdom.

And this is what God does. Even today, this is often His strategy. At times He dives deep. He’s still moving and grooving, perhaps more so, but not so we can see.

This is why to walk with Him you have to believe.

Hebrews 11:6 tells us, “**without faith it is impossible to please Him**.” The silence you’re experiencing - the communications blackout - is just a test of your faith.

Before Jesus is the Lily of the Valley, or the Rose of Sharon... He’s *a Root of Jesse*. Before the promise blossoms upward, faith takes root. We like lilies and love roses - but first we have to cling tightly to the *root*.

This is why the most important twelve words in the Christmas story are the first twelve words of the NT...

Matthew 1:1, “**The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David...**” Read that and think Isaiah 11:1... The root just broke the soil. Love just sprouted.

Both Matthew and Luke trace the lineage of Jesus the Messiah, *the Christ*, all the way back to King David.

Jesus is the stem on the family tree that will sit on David’s throne, and rule forever, and save His people.

And I love this picture in Isaiah 11, Jesus as a *root*.

A root isn't the glamorous part of the plant. Imagine, buying a dozen roses for your wife with the roots still attached. *But there'd be no flowers without the root.*

And there'd be no salvation without God's promise to David of "*a root of Jesse*"... planted 1000 years earlier, trimmed through judgment, and war, and devastation - but always there - still growing below the surface.

That's why the opening words of Matthew are so encouraging. The *root* that had endured crisis after crisis, and hung on for so long, was ready to bear *fruit*.

Think of the OT as a charred, barren mountainside destroyed by a forest fire. Between the testaments there's a long, long time. But with the first verse of the NT, *the Gospel Good News*, the promise sprouts.

Spring has sprung. A beautiful blossom buds. It's a new day with new possibilities. Life is born again.

The eternal king promised to David has finally come. The tree God has been trimming is ready for display!

After the first few days of our Israel tour the Bible comes to life to most people. Verses you've read all your life clear up. You start connecting dots and seeing the bigger picture. *And everyone has the same question...*

"With all this archaeological, and geographical, and historical evidence around them - why don't the Israelis embrace the prophecies and accept Jesus as their Messiah?" It's a good question. *And I have two answers.*

Romans 11:25 is the simple explanation, “blindness in part has happened to Israel...” Rather than a host of rational reasons, Paul chalks it up to spiritual blindness.

The devil wants to keep God’s people in the dark and he works overtime to do just that. It’s a spiritual battle.

But there’s another answer. When Jesus came the first time, He wasn’t the kind of Messiah the rabbis and scholars anticipated. They weren’t looking for **a root**.

A Grass roots Messiah was not on their radar. They were looking for a person who laid down the Law - who would crushed His enemies - who worked from the top down - who seized control - who imposed His will...

Like the Jews of old, they wanted a king. A liberator. A conqueror who would end the Roman oppression and launch a golden age. In fact, there was a time in Jesus’ ministry when the Jews tried to force Him to be king. He refused, and went *underground* - *off the grid* for a time.

Jesus was a root! And in many ways He conducted His ministry humbly, lowly - in a *down to earth* manner.

One day, the Jews asked Jesus, “*Where is this kingdom you talk about?*” He replied, “**The kingdom of God does not come with observation** (it’s not about what the public sees); **nor will they say, 'see here!' or 'see there!' for indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.**”

From the start, Jesus intended to keep a low profile, avoid the limelight, stay under the radar. He came to build a spiritual kingdom - not an political, earthly one.

The phrase “*root of Jesse*” not only speaks to Jesus’ pedigree, but it tells us that He intended to be *root-like* in how He went about His business and built His kingdom.

Christianity is the ultimate *grass roots* movement.

Remember the guidelines God gave Samuel in choosing a king. They helped identify His heir... “The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

Jesus is all about the heart. He taught us that real righteousness and worship come from the heart. Rather than rule from a throne, He intends to rule in our hearts.

Jesus is *the king of hearts!* Unlike the world we live in, Jesus operates *from the inside out - from the bottom up - by wooing not imposing.* He draws us, He doesn’t drive us. Like David, He’s a different kind of king. He’s *a root!*

In Isaiah 11 we’re told that when this root “*comes forth*” it will be identified in two ways... **First**, “*the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him...*” **Second**, He’ll be “*a banner to the people.*” Even “*the Gentiles will seek Him.*”

Just as the recipient of the promise, King David, was anointed with oil, so was its ultimate beneficiary, Jesus the Messiah. The Holy Spirit was the gooey olive oil...

In the life of Jesus the Holy Spirit brought seven traits.

First, He was “*the Spirit of the LORD*” or in the Hebrew, “*the Spirit of Yahweh*” (the one, true God.)

Jesus was “*the son of David,*” but *He was also God.*

There was a divine Spirit resting upon Him. He was kingly - *Godly with a capital G*. The innocent baby laying in the manger, was also Creator of heaven and earth.

But the life of Jesus also bore evidence of six other traits. One Holy Spirit brought six traits that separated the Messiah among men. Call them, *the first essential oils... the Spirit of wisdom and understanding - the Spirit of counsel and might - the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord...* these were all poured out upon Jesus!

And today, Jesus conveys these blessing *by His Spirit*. The anointing oil still flows into the life of His followers.

Jesus came to build a *spiritual* kingdom. *His presence isn't always felt. His wisdom isn't always known. His might isn't always seen. His counsel isn't always taken.*

Even today Jesus traffics in the spiritual realm. Faith and open hearts are required to *perceive* and *receive* His work. But He influences nonetheless. Roots are strong. Even underground, they still have a huge effect.

Check out my driveway. That's six inch concrete, yet it's cracked and crumbled. *And why?* A root is pushing from the underside. It's breaking and remaking what's on the surface. Though not seen, a root is a powerful force.

And this is the effect Jesus, *"a root of Jesse,"* wants to have in your life. He wants to break you of your pride, and remake your life into something beautiful and godly.

Like trimming a tree at Christmas, Jesus wants to adorn your life *with His presence - with wisdom and understanding - with counsel*

and might - with knowledge and reverence for the Lord. I hope you'll let Him!

This year let the living Lord really *take root* in your life!

And finally, Isaiah tells us that the Messiah, this root, will be identified as *“a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious.”* In essence, *this all takes us to a good place!*

God's end game is a glorious resting place for us.

Isn't it interesting how *our roots* become *our banner*.

The emblems on a family crest highlight our roots.

Think of the American flag. The stripes represent the thirteen original colonies. Red is for courage. White is for pure intentions. Blue is for vigilance and justice. Every time you salute a flag you honor what Americans value.

And this is what Isaiah means when He says the *root of Jesse* will be a banner to us and cause the Gentiles to seek Him. Everyone will rally around our common *root*.

This is why I love Christmas! It speaks of roots, but it's also a banner, and it beckons all men to rally around it.

Christmas is Heaven's calling card. It's God's invitation. That God would love us enough to become one of us. God *rooted* Himself down deeply into the fabric of our history... He nestled into the human soil.

He grew as a root, a small shoot - *under the surface, incognito, without fanfare, unpretentious*. Jesus came humbly and lowly - like *a root* rather than *a treetop*.

And this is Christmas - **our origin becomes our banner.**

Christmas is the reminder that God still enters through the lowest door. That His greatness is in His ability to be small. That His power to change hearts stems from His willingness to be vulnerable, and love, and risk rejection.

Hey, **when we praise Jesus we're rooting for a root!**

If you're a soldier in Afghanistan and you've been out on patrol - you've been in the village - it's been dangerous... But now it's time to return to camp...

As soon as you see that American flag flying over the compound it does something inside you. You're stirred. You're reminded. You pledge allegiance all over again.

And this is what it means to have **the root of Jesse** as our banner. Christmas is proof God keeps His promises. All God's purposes ultimately take us to a good place.

Despite our failure, and judgment, and rebellion, and hardships - even in the times when it looked like all hope was lost, Jesus was active. He was at work - *like a root*.

When I can't see Him, He's there. *Like a root*, I feel His push, His nudge, His influence. And He's growing...

This Christmas, let's get rooted! And stir up our faith!