

# THE ROOT OF CHRISTMAS

## ISAIAH 11:1-2

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.

Why is it that Americans have a fascination with royalty, especially at Christmas time? Movie makers like Hallmark, Netflix, and Ion have created a whole genre of film around royals, romance, and the Christmas season.

Here's a sampling of titles... [A Christmas In Royal Fashion](#), [A Prince For Christmas](#), [A Crown For Christmas](#), [Christmas At The Palace](#), [A Princess For Christmas](#), [A Royal Queen's Christmas](#), [Royally Ever After](#), and [The Knight Before Christmas](#)... and that's just the tip of the iceberg! There are dozens more...

At Christmas, this tends to happen to women... They put on flannel pajamas, pour a cup of eggnog, fix some figgy pudding, and nestle under some blankets to watch cheesy, predictable, corny - yet irresistible - movies.

*And wow, how times have changed!* Just 250 years ago this country hung a king in effigy. England's King, *Prince George*, was our public enemy #1. Today, William and Kate's son, *Prince George*, is adored by Americans. Every month 700k Instagram hashtags and 200k google searches contain his name. I guess we've always had a *love/hate relationship* with kings and princes.

And this describes 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 Him, 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. *He looked the part, but lacked the heart*. And Saul ended up a disaster. Under his reign Israel lost land to the Philistines. Saul ended up dying falling on a sword.

In contrast, 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 and love for God.

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 laid out the criteria for his selection. God told him, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature..." Saul had been all about appearance. "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 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!"

And 1 Samuel 16:13 describes the 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." The prophet emptied the horn full of oil on David's head. *The kid brother would be king!* And we're told, "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.

And all of Israel's future kings went by this 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* 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 rod or shoot came from the stalk of Jesse. A bud began to grow from the stump. The Spirit of God came upon a new Branch in mankind's family tree. Most of us 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 promise and possibilities.

When the time came for David to take the throne, the war-mongering Philistines were on a rampage. They'd invaded from the west to take most of Israel. Yet David drove the enemy back to the sea, and unified the twelve tribes. He took Jerusalem to be his capitol, and built a palace. 2 Samuel 7:1 sums up his conquest, "The LORD had given (David) rest from all his enemies all around."

Then one day, as David strolled along the portico of his exquisite palace, he surveyed Jerusalem's skyline, and noticed an inconsistency. The King was carrying on

affairs of state in *a palatial mansion*, while the worship of God was being conducted in *a rustic tent*...

David thought, *“this isn’t right!”* The king knew the true God overflows the heavens, but His abode on Earth - a tent - was not in keeping with His glory. *A few animal skins over bronze poles didn’t cut it.* 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 God for permission God refused him. David was *the king* no less, yet God denied him a building permit!

David went on to *purchase the property, quarry the stone, cut the cedar, gather the gold, recruit the artisans*... he made all the logistical preparations for a Temple. But God said, *“No,”* to David building Him a house. Instead, **God promised to build David a house!**

And this is *just like our gracious God!* David wants to do God a favor, but instead God does David a favor, and more than just *a favor*. God’s promise to David will change the course of history and rescue Earth from the clutches of Satan... God promises David, not *a literal house*, but *a political house* - **a royal house** - a dynasty of descendants who will rule God’s people forever... Realize, Saul’s son died with him in battle. But David would not only see a son succeed him, God looked far 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 who delivered this news to David. In 2 Samuel 7 Nathan told him, *“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 a Temple.

In verse 14 God speaks of the special relationship He’ll have with these kings, *“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. Solomon 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 had promised. Toward the end of his life, David's son, 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? I suppose we'll never know!* But 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 the very "root" - a mere "sprout."

In fact, Isaiah 10 compares the demise of Judah to the fall of another great kingdom, *the Assyrians*. And Isaiah speaks of it metaphorically as the clearing of a forest. In Isaiah 10:33 he 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." Hey, this implies some *very serious tree trimming*.

I gain a new appreciation for Isaiah's imagery here every time I have trees taken down in my yard... I live in a pine forest, and from time to time I have to thin out the forest. We've had to fall huge, really tall pine trees.

And it's always a spectacle. I call in the professionals, Wayne and his crew. I get an iced tea, sit down on my deck, and watch an amazing operation.

First, a climber with spikes on his shoes climbs up the tree, lopping off limbs as he goes... When he reaches the top all that's left under him is a naked stick of wood. So he comes back down cutting five foot slices... And when those logs fall, they slap the ground hard. When they hit it sounds like thunder. The house shakes... It's amazing

that trees so mighty and dominant are suddenly no more - they're now nothing but stumps. *This was the plight of Assyria and of 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, it took drastic measures. Enter God's instrument of judgment, *the feared Babylonians!*

2 Kings 25 tells the sad story of Zedekiah, the last Jewish king. You could say the last full limb of 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 ever 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 them to return to their homeland.

There is a military strategy called "**Scorched Earth**" where the invading army destroys everything its enemy might be able to use to survive. Crops are burned, wells are poisoned, railroad tracks and airports are demolished. Even potential soldiers are exterminated.

This was Stalin's strategy against Germany in World War 2. It was the Union General Tecumseh Sherman's plan against the confederates on his famous March to the Sea. And this more or less describes the tactics used against the Hebrews in the 6th century BC.

Imagine, your property burnt to a crisp. The green fields are now black. Shrubs and bushes have nothing on their branches. The trees are charred timber. This was both the physical landscape, *and figuratively it was the spiritual landscape*, Judah left when taken into exile and what welcomed them when they returned.

When Jerusalem was sacked, and the Temple burned, and Zedekiah tortured and captured - many of the Jews despaired of the promises God made 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 in the soil, getting ready to break the surface. Underneath 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 the stem that nothing could kill. This was the indestructible branch.

Recall 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!** The *bud* was a *Bud!*

There were faithful Jews who still held to this promise God made to David - a shoot would grow from His stem, a branch from His roots, **a seed from his loins** 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 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 the word "**Messiah**" - in Greek the term 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. That little stem that's 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 and collapsing towers of September 11, 2001, 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 damaged 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 arborists there were equally skeptical. But once the charred bark was cut away, and the roots trimmed back, and the tree planted into rich soil, it started to grow. *And it got 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. Yet when first introduced to the park some people objected, for it's unlike all the other trees there. It's ugliness *or uniqueness* sticks out. And 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 and resilience reminds us that the roots of freedom and courage can never be extinguished. Now each year the New York Parks Department give seedlings from The Survivor Tree to three communities who've also suffered a recent tragedy. The seedlings remind them to never give up.

And this is 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 our enemy has charred, and blown through, and broken, and crumbled what we valued* - be assured God's promises never fail! God has a Man - *a King, an Anointed One, a Messiah* - who's well rooted to stand up to our storms.

Yet with all God's promises 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 dare to rule over Israel and the Jews.

*After Malachi even the voice of God's prophets became mute.* The period following the Babylonian exile leading up to the first century is known by scholars of biblical history 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 television.

*Talk about suspense? A man on the moon!* But there was always a terrifying moment. It occurred on the astronauts reentry into Earth's atmosphere. There was a communications blackout. It lasted minutes, but oh, it felt like an eternity... "[This is Houston, do you read me?](#)" (Static) *Sometimes, the static lasted for minutes.* And those four minutes felt like four hours, *just waiting*.

So, imagine a 600 year communications blackout. That's how long it took for *believers in God's promise* to regain visible contact with David's descendant.

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**. And God was working, "**under the radar**." God had gone **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 Jesus you have to believe. Hebrews 11:6 tells us, "**without faith it is impossible to please Him**." See, the silence you're experiencing - the communications blackout you're in - is a test of 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 grows downward. We like lilies and 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 breaks the soil. Love has just sprouted.

Both Matthew and Luke trace the lineage of Jesus the Messiah, *the Anointed*, 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.

I love this picture in Isaiah 11, Jesus as a **root**. A root isn't the glamorous part of the plant. Imagine, buying flowers for your wife with the root balls still attached. They're ugly, *but there'd be no flowers without the root*.

And there would 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*.

It parallels our Christmas tradition. *We go to the farm or attic, pick out a spruce, bring it home, trim it with lights and ornaments*; then the grand unveiling takes place. And that's what occurred the first Christmas - the buried promise of a Savior finally broke ground!

After the first few days of our Israel tour the Bible comes to life for most people. Verses you've read all your life are seen in a fresh light. You connect the dots and see a bigger



picture. *And everyone asks 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 Messiah?"* It's a good question... *I have two answers...*

The simple explanation is Romans 11:25, "*blindness in part has happened to Israel...*" Rather than a host of rational reasons, Paul just chalks it up to a spiritual blindness. The devil wants to keep God's people in the dark and he works overtime. 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 Grassroots Messiah** was not on their radar. They were hoping for someone to lay down the Law - crush His enemies - rule from the top down - seize control and imposed His will... Like the Jews of old they wanted **a king**. A liberator 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!** In many ways He conducted His ministry humbly, lowly - in a *down to earth* manner.

*Do you recall the kid in school everyone called "Stumpy"?* Every school had a Stumpy! He was usually short, and thick, *and well, stumpy*. But in a real sense **Jesus was a Stumpy!** Isaiah calls Him **a root**. Rather than an intimidating and overawing persona, Jesus was down to earth, and solid, and unassuming, and relatable.

Jesus was a king and He talked about a kingdom, but there was a disconnect. For what Jesus spoke of was not the prevailing expectation. One day, the Jews asked Him, "*Where is this kingdom you talk about?*" And Jesus replied, "*The kingdom of God does not come with observation* (it's not about what can be seen); *nor will they say, 'see here!' or 'see there!' for indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.*" From the start, Jesus intended for His kingdom, His movements, His victories to be low profile, to avoid the limelight, to stay under the radar. He was building something spiritual not physical.

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 grassroots movement.**

Remember the guidelines God gave Samuel in choosing a king. They help to 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.*"

And Jesus is all about the heart. He taught us that real righteousness and worship come from the heart. Rather than rule from a throne, Jesus wants to rule in our hearts. He's *the king of hearts!* Unlike the world we live in, Jesus operates *from the inside out - 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!**

And because of the spiritual nature of His kingdom Jesus gets stuff done by His Spirit. Isaiah writes, “**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.**” As the horn of olive oil was poured on David’s head, the gooeyness of God’s Spirit covered Jesus.

And I love that the Holy Spirit is like olive oil. Any type of vegetable oil is gooey, and tacky, and thick, and syrupy. It doesn’t come off easily. It gets into crevasses. It saturates and permeates deeply. And this is how Jesus rolled. His works were undeniable and memorable and moved you deeply. Jesus never left anyone unaffected.

In fact, this verse, Isaiah 11:2 explains a difficult NT text. Revelation begins with a greeting from the Trinity. Chapter 1:5 “**Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come** (that’s God the Father), **and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne** (that’s God the Spirit), **and from Jesus Christ** (God the Son)...” The Father greets you. Jesus greets you. *The seven Spirits greet you?* This is confusing. There’s just one Holy Spirit. But here Isaiah helps us...

Isaiah 11 also speaks of one Holy Spirit, but reveals Him in seven ways. He is the Spirit **(1) of the LORD, (2) of wisdom, (3) of understanding, (4) of counsel, (5) of might, (6) of knowledge, and (7) of the fear of the LORD.** There’re seven manifestations of this one Spirit.

It’s interesting the Menorah, the oil-fueled lamp-stand in Israel’s Temple, had seven stems. One lamp was on the center, vertical branch. The other six lamps were at the end of three U-shaped branches. And this corresponds with Isaiah’s configuration in Chapter 11.

The Menorah was a symbol of God’s Spirit. Central to His identity, He is “**the Spirit of the LORD.**” Followed by three couplets, He is “**the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the LORD.**” Put it together and here’s a listing of **the first essential oils.** These are the traits God’s Spirit brought to Jesus, and He also brings to us.

For even today, God still conveys these traits to His followers *by His Spirit.* The anointing oil still flows.

Jesus is still building a *spiritual* kingdom, rather than imposing a *physical* rule. Rather than enforcement, Jesus relies on influence. Which means His government can be ignored, or resisted, or just missed by carnal people who fail to tune into His Spirit... *His presence isn’t always felt. His wisdom isn’t always known. His might isn’t always seen. His counsel isn’t always taken...*

Today, Jesus still traffics in the spiritual realm. Thus, faith and open hearts are required to *perceive* and *receive* His work. But His influence is still strong. His roots grow deep. His impact is still thick and tacky and gooey. Even underground, He has an enormous effect.

I want to close, by having you check out my driveway. That's six inch concrete by the way, yet over time it cracks and crumbles. *And do you know why?* Well, **a root** has been pushing from the underside. **A root** has been breaking and remaking what's on the surface. Though not seen, **roots** are powerful change agents! A strong root, like Jesus, can break up the hardest heart!

So this Christmas, remember we serve "**a root of Jesse.**" He's not always seen, but from the inside out Jesus is working in our lives to break us of our pride, and to remake us into something beautiful and godly.

Like the trimming of a Christmas tree, Jesus adorns our lives with the seven ornaments of His Spirit: *His presence, His wisdom and understanding, His counsel and might, His knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

I hope you'll let God trim your life with the Spirit of Jesus. Let the living Lord *take root* in you this Christmas!