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### The Rod of Jesse

Jeremiah 2:13, "...My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

This is a graphic description of the people to whom Christ came. In Genesis 12:3, God promised to bless the nations of the world THROUGH Abraham. From this verse, the Jew concluded that to be a descendent of Abraham was to be a child of God and thus a citizen of God's Kingdom. Thus, it didn't matter how you lived, what you did, or who you worshipped, provided you were a child of Abraham, you were saved!

It was in this context that the first Christmas was celebrated; and is still celebrated. In the first century A.D., the coming of the Messiah was understood to be in reference NOT to one's position in the Kingdom of God, BUT to one's prosperity. And in the more than 2000 years

that have come and gone since the first advent of Christ, people's thinking hasn't changed much! Today, most look at the Baby in the manger in terms of prosperity. God's will for us in Christ in this state is happiness, prosperity, and victory! That is Why Christ Came and that is what we ought to expect From God in this life! Yet, few look at the manger and see the real meaning of Christ's coming: The violent entrance of the Kingdom of God into this world!

John 3:8b, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil."

In 931 B.C., the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the North which had wicked and evil kings, and Judah in the South which had both good and evil kings (which is why it lasted longer as a nation). The setting for our text finds us initially dealing with the Northern Kingdom and the Assyrians. Recall, because the wickedness of the Northern Kingdom, God raised up a nation to punish Israel: Assyria.

We pick up the history in 734 BC, because of the threat of Assyria, the kingdoms north of Judah sought to join together in order to form a unified front to withstand this emerging nation. The Kingdom of Judah under Ahaz however did NOT want to join this coalition (because of their previously bad relations with the Northern Kingdoms). As such, the kingdoms of the north threatened to depose Ahaz and set up a king on the Judean throne who would fight with them (Isaiah 7).

In his rebellion and unbelief, Ahaz, the king of Judah, called upon the Assyrians for help! In response to Ahaz's plea, the Assyrians came in force. And in 722 B.C. they smashed Israel as well as its secular neighbors and allies! Assyria, however, didn't stop with the destruction of Israel. In their lust for war, Assyria continued south, eventually threatening Jerusalem itself!

During this time, there was a Judean by the name of Isaiah who served as a prophet of God from 740 BC to 681 BC. Having come to a profound and life-changing understanding of the greatness of God (Isaiah 6), Isaiah purposed in this prophecy to exhort the nation of Judah to an uncommon faith in view of their God!

Who is this God? Isaiah introduced the people of God to a very important name, "The Rod of Jesse," (Isaiah 11:1)!

Notice the context of Isaiah 11, for the this we must go back to Isaiah 9 which contains a description of the coming threat of Assyria. Isaiah :8-11 picks up on the prophecy as though Isaiah was standing on the city walls of Jerusalem looking north toward the Kingdom of Israel:

Isaiah 9:8, "The Lord sends a message against Jacob [i.e. His covenant people], and it falls on Israel [the northern kingdom]."

Literally this word message could be rendered "a word." I love this! Sometimes God sends plagues and sometimes help. Here the Lord sent just "a word" — in this case a message of impending judgment.

Isaiah 9:9a, “And all the people know it...”

The word for “know” does NOT mean “recognize” (as if Isaiah’s message was understood). RATHER it meant “...and all the people experience it!” Truly, all the people of Israel were going to experience this coming doom first hand! As a nation, they would be wiped out, devastated, and so destroyed!

Isaiah 9:9b-10, “...that is, Ephraim [which was the main tribe of the northern Kingdom] and the inhabitants of Samaria [the capital city, and hence the king. Now notice, if ever there was a people who needed the disciplining hand of the Lord, it was the Northern Kingdom...], asserting in pride and in arrogance of heart: ‘The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with smooth stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will replace them with cedars.’”

The kingdom of Israel’s response when confronted by Amos (765 BC) and Hosea (750 BC) concerning God’s coming judgment because their sin was, “Whatever God destroys, we’ll rebuild! In fact, we’ll make it even better than it was before; so, what’s the big deal?” Talk about pride!

Isaiah 9:11, “Therefore the Lord raises against them adversaries from Rezin, and spurs their enemies on”

This ultimately is in reference to Assyria. On account of the pride of His people, God raised up Assyria to humble them!

Now, Isaiah 9:12-10:4, details the punishment that the Assyrians would give to Israel. And amazingly, as heavy as the disciplining hand of the Lord would rest upon Israel, the northern Kingdom would NOT repent!

Isaiah 9:13, “Yet the people do not turn back to Him who struck them, nor do they seek the Lord of hosts.”

As a result, we read the recurring theme throughout this section.

Isaiah 9:12, 21; 10:4, “...in spite of all of this His anger does not turn away.”

In Isaiah 10:5-19 we read of a major shift in Isaiah’s focus. Here Isaiah details the punishment that God would send on ASSYRIA on account of their pride!

Isaiah 10:12-13a, “So it will be that when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will say, ‘I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness.’ For he has said, ‘By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this...’”

God raised up Assyria to be a tool of discipline in His hand, as such the nation was powerful and

unstoppable. Yet this created a false sense of national pride amongst the Assyrians such that the nation began to believe that all that they were a testimony of their own greatness! In fact, the God of Israel Himself was subject to them (cf. Isaiah 10:15)!

Accordingly, after disciplining His people with the Assyrians, God would turn His focus on Assyria to discipline it because its pride. Using the metaphor of a forest, Isaiah says that God would smite the mighty forest of Assyria such that a child would be able to count the remaining trees (Isaiah 10:18-19). Now, in Isaiah 10:20-34, Isaiah RETURNED TO THE TOPIC OF ISRAEL and the destructive approach of the Assyrian army, starting way north and tracing its approach to the city of Jerusalem itself (this occurred in the days of Hezekiah, Isaiah 36:2a).

Slowly, the Assyrians would conquer city after city. Isaiah describes the approach of the Assyrians as they blazed a path of destruction to Jerusalem. The cities mentioned in Isaiah 10:28-32 form a meandering line beginning with Aiath and ending with Nob (notice the picture).

Isaiah 10:28-32, “He has come against Aiath [a city in the territory of Benjamin, about 10 miles N of Jerusalem]. He has passed through Migron; at Michmash he deposited his baggage [a city about 7 1/2 miles NE of Jerusalem]. They have gone through the pass, saying, ‘Geba will be our lodging place.’ Ramah is terrified, and Gibeah of Saul has fled away. Cry aloud with your voice, O daughter of Gallim! Pay attention, Laishah and wretched Anathoth! Madmenah has fled. The inhabitants of Gebim have sought refuge. Yet today he will halt at Nob [a priestly city of Benjamin in sight of Jerusalem]; He shakes his fist at the mountain of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem.”



If you were a child of God listening to this message, you would be filled with horror! It is one thing to have one’s property ravished by natural disaster: fire, tornado, flood, hurricane, etc., but imagine knowing with certainty that in short order an army would approach our hometown of Broomfield from the north raping, pillaging, and destroying? First Wellington would fall... then Ft. Collins... Loveland... Longmont... Erie... and then Lafayette! ALL SOON WOULD BE DEVASTATED!

This was the message Isaiah gave to His people. In fact, returning to the metaphor of a forest, Isaiah says that the Mighty Forest of David would be mowed down by the approaching army of Assyria until nothing remained BUT A STUMP! And yet here the threat of Assyria would end (Isaiah 10:33-34), for God would completely destroy the Assyrian army, a destruction which can be read about in Isaiah 38.

Isaiah 38:36-38, “Then the angel of the Lord went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead.

So Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed and returned home, and lived at Nineveh. And it came about as he was worshipping in the house of... his god... his sons killed him with the sword..."

The total devastation of Assyria would occur in 609 BC when God raised up the Babylonians who would destroy this evil nation!

All of this serves as the setting of Isaiah 11. Next to the destroyed FOREST OF ASSYRIA- a forest so small that a child could count the trees on account of the judgment of God (Isaiah 10:19)- a picture of TOTAL devastation sat another forest, the forest of David, THE FOREST OF GOD! And though it also lay desolate on account of Assyria, nevertheless God would preserve life in the stump of one tree!

With that, notice our passage picking up on the "stump" that would remain.

Isaiah 11:1, "Then a shoot [or a "rod"] will spring from the stem [or "stump"] of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit."

This is an incredible promise which is the difference between despair and triumph in any difficult situation! In this context, against the back drop of the terror, devastation, and destruction of Assyria, God RESURRECTED the decimated forest of His people! Yet notice the beginning of this resurrection: It was and remains humble and obscure. That is the emphasis and focus of Isaiah 11.

The phrase, "stem of Jesse" by the time of Isaiah, the phrase, "house of David," stood for strength and power! In fact, everywhere the imagery of Christ as a "branch" is used in the Bible, it is referenced as coming from "the house of David" or from "the Lord" (Isaiah 4:2; Jeremiah 33; Revelation 5:5; 22:16)!

Yet here it is, "Rod of Jesse" from which this "branch" would arise. Why the change? And what is the significance of this change? "Stem" or "rod of Jesse" pictures the same idea as "house of David" except for one thing: "Rod of JESSE" portrays the concept of humility. Jesse, the father of David, was of the city of Bethlehem which, at this time, was the most insignificant city in all of Judah!

So, what is the message of this passage? What is the significance of the promise of "the Rod of Jesse"! Notice, a love-relationship with God brings about a life of faith which most often will lead to humility and insignificance by world standards.

Philippians 1:29, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

James asked the following rhetorical question:

James 2:5b, "...did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?"

Christ said:

Mark 2:17, "...it is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Such is the humble beginning of the work of God in this world today! And yet from this humble beginning, God is pleased to raise up a "rod/shoot" which will become a "branch"- which throughout Scripture portrays the idea of a Kingdom! Notice...

Jeremiah 23:5-6, "'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'When I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely...'"

The "branch" referenced here is the unstoppable and unthwartable Kingdom of God which the Lord established and continues to establish in Christ! Zechariah, speaking of the Messiah wrote:

Zechariah 6:12, "...Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the Lord. Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the Lord, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices [i.e. the office of priest and king. IOW, this "branch" would be both a priest and a king].'"

The "Rod of Jesse" becoming a "branch" references the glorious promise of the Messianic Kingdom of God! And yet, we need go no further than the text before us! Notice how our passage and the "Rod of Jesse"- both what it would do and be.

Isaiah 11:2-3a, "And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him [the branch is a person], the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And He will delight in the fear of the Lord..."

Unlike the leaders of Israel and Judah, this "branch" will be wise, powerful, holy, and wholly devoted to the Lord!

Isaiah 11:3b-4a, "...and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear; but with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth..."

This "Branch" will exercise the office of an upright judge and so a King! As King, he will care for the weak, afflicted, and needy! And yet, He will do more.

Isaiah 11:4b, "...and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth and with the breath

of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist.”

This “branch” will be a Warrior-King who will lead His triumphant Kingdom unto victory and glory!

So what is the message that Isaiah intended His people to receive with this promise? Out of the devastation that most certainly was coming, God would raise up an unstoppable, unthwartable Kingdom over which the Messiah would reign! That is the message of the Rod of Jesse!

But what is the significance of the name on our own lives? Now think with me, the message of this passage, the promise of the “Rod of Jesse” means very little to the one living in wealth, luxury, and ease of days. Truly, for this assurance/this sign to be of any comfort to the Christian, WE MUST BE IN A CRUCIBLE either on account of a bitter providence or the disciplining hand of the Lord (again, that is the context out of which this title arose)! So WHEN-not “if”- God brings one of His children there, behold the promise of the Lord: Out of devastation God brings triumph/victory!

The people of God in Judah needed to hold on to this as they lived through the turmoil that awaited them in the coming years: war, famine, disease, hardship, destruction, and exile. And so do we! When Christ’s Kingdom entered into this world, the “forest of God” was in complete shambles! The only faithful Servant was Jesus Himself... born in Bethlehem... born in a manger! Yet from this humble beginning, God brought about His Kingdom’s purpose. And so this principle continues to be worked out in our world today. It is NOT out of the context of plenty and ease that God brings forth Kingdom Fruit, BUT in turmoil, distress, and despair!

Family of God, that is the message of the “Rod of Jesse”! Out of the most humble and insignificant settings God brings forth His Kingdom fruit (Matthew 13:31)!<sup>1</sup> We see this vividly in 1 Samuel 7.

1 Samuel 7:12, “Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’” - it is from this verse we get the line in “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”, “Here I raise my Ebenezer...”<sup>2</sup>

To understand 1 Samuel 7, we must go back to 1 Samuel 4 where on account of Samson’s dominance and fame, the Philistines planned a campaign that would strike at the heart of Israel: they not only would attack God’s people, but they would attack Shiloh, the center of Israel’s worship! However, God’s people were alerted to their coming and so they met the Philistine army at the city of Ebenezer. Here they brought the Ark of the Covenant believing, with Stephen Spielberg, that no human army engaging in battle with the Ark of the Covenant at its head could be defeated. And yet they were defeated! In fact, they suffered a massacre in which they lost:

- 30,000 husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons!

- Their religion- the Philistine capture of the Ark was a declaration that the God of Israel was weak and impotent!
- Their priesthood- recall that Eli and his sons all died at this time!
- Their fellowship with God in the form of the Ark!
- And so the heart and soul of their country and kingdom!

Because of this massacre, the mentioning of the name of Ebenezer would evoke in the hearts of God's people shame, sadness, regret, and even horror! Yet you know God wouldn't let the story end here! And so, after single handedly vanquishing the Philistine nation, God brought the Ark back to His people who stored it in Kiriath-jearim until the day when David would endeavor to bring it up to Jerusalem. Shortly after this, at a time when God's people were most vulnerable, they were engaged in a worship service of renewal at Mizpah, the Philistine Lords joined together and attacked Israel to do away with them once and for all! In their weakness and humility, and yet with a renewed love and trust in the Lord, God's people went out fought against the Philistine army; which was roundly defeated!

At this point and with as much drama and excitement as when Simba, in The Lion King, ascended Pride Rock, Samuel erected a memorial to the Greatness of God and His commitment to His people. He named it, "Ebenezer!" In other words, no longer were the people of God to shrink back when they heard the name of Ebenezer; this name of sadness was to become a name of gladness as it now represented the victory and glory of our Almighty God!

That is the message of "the Rod of Jesse"! God not only brings good out of darkness, but He transforms the difficulties of life into the ground of our richest praise!

The story of the Englishman John Lancaster<sup>3</sup> has been told many times. He was a low-life and a thief going nowhere in a hurry. Accordingly, in 1748 he was arrested for breaking into a home and stealing nineteen yards of velvet. Yet amazingly for this crime, he received the sentence of death! While in prison, awaiting his execution, Lancaster heard of a woman, named Sarah Peters, who regularly visited inmates on death row, and so he requested a visit from her.

Sarah Peters agreed and the next morning Sarah and a friend met with John and six other prisoners in a cell. As they sang a hymn together, read Scripture, and prayed, the prisoners were brought to tears, convicted of their need for God. And that day, John Lancaster as well as the other six inmates became citizens of the Kingdom of God! The conversion of these seven men made Sarah Peters determined to do whatever she could for these men in their final days. And so she endeavored to meet with them on a daily basis to read Scripture and pray.

On the morning of John Lancaster's death, a couple of months later, John made this confession to Sarah, "Blessed be the day I came into this place! O what a glorious work hath the Lord carried on in my soul since I came hither!" It wasn't a couple of hours later and John Lancaster was ushered into the presence of God!

From this we conclude that God's will for our life is NOT to bring you to the point where we



confess that Christ is all we need. Rather, and this is important, God's will is to bring us to the point where we confess that Jesus is all we want!<sup>4</sup> That is where God was about to bring His people in the days of Isaiah. And that is where God in His grace continues to bring each of us in Christ today! This is The Christ of Christmas!

### End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> In the words of Paul, speaking of the gospel, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Cor. 4:7-11)! Notice, Paul here says three things. Number 1, that God works out His redeeming grace in the context of the impossibility that the glory and honor may rest with Him alone. Truly, God has chosen to store the balm of Gilead in bed pans/earthen vessels! As such, number 2, though many times life may find us (1) afflicted- we are NOT crushed! (2) perplexed- we need NEVER be in despair! (3) persecuted- we are NOT forsaken! (4) struck down- yet we will NEVER be destroyed! What then is the point and end to it all? Number 3, through it all God is pleased to "manifest the life of Jesus in our mortal flesh!" This is what the Rod of Jesse is all about! That is the Message that Isaiah gave his generation! That is a principle by which we must live as servants of the Lord!

<sup>2</sup> *Red Trinity Hymnal* #457.

<sup>3</sup> Take from *The One Year Christian History*, E. and Sharon Rusten, pp. 604-605.

<sup>4</sup> After suffering one devastating struggle after another, Paul was brought to this confession, "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). In fact, knowing Christ and having the life of Jesus manifested in his flesh was so important to Paul, he took upon himself the ministry and mission of the Rod of Jesse, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).