

“Prepare the Way!”

Isaiah 40:1-11 ¹

Well, here we are once more at the beginning of Advent and at the first Sunday of the Christian liturgical year. As Commander and Elizabeth reminded us at the beginning of the service, although Santa often does a better job of PR, the Reason for the Season really has nothing to do with commerce and everything to do with gratitude. The Idea of Advent is that we give focused attention, not to gift lists, but to preparing our hearts to receive God’s Love in deeper and more transforming ways.

As best I’ve been able to discover, there is no “official” list of themes for the four Sundays of Advent. While the list of possibilities is fairly short, there is a lot of variation in the order in which they are addressed.²

The sequence that appeals most to me is the one we use, namely PROPHECY, PENITENCE, LOVE, and JOY. PROPHECY gives attention to God’s advance notice of the coming of Messiah, God’s Redeemer. This advance notice first appears in Genesis 3:15, and it becomes clearer as time goes on, especially in Isaiah 53.

PENITENCE reminds us that it is our own Sin that made, and continues to make, God’s amazing redemption necessary. LOVE highlights the deep and enduring divine affection that caused God to secure our redemption at all; and JOY is what we experience when redemption becomes real in our own lives and spirits. Today, we look at PROPHECY.

While messianic prophecy occurs literally throughout the Older Testament, that prophecy is most extensive in the last section of Isaiah, which begins with chapter 40. Our Advent Journey this year will focus on that chapter in three parts: (1) **Prepare the Way!** (vv. 1-11); (2) **With Whom will You Compare Me?** (vv. 12-26); and (3) **Walk, Run, Soar, Renew!** (vv. 27-31).

I encourage you to read Isaiah 40 every week this month, allowing God’s Spirit to take you deeper and deeper into this remarkable chapter. I also suggest that you keep your Bible open as we make our way through this chapter verse by verse. While we’ll limit this study primarily to chapter 40, the study of Isaiah 40-66 has produced more scholarly literature than any other part of the Older Testament, and you might want to read that whole section as part of your devotions this month.

Scholars vigorously debate whether the whole of Isaiah was written by one prophet, or by two, or by three. Some of these opinions emerge from differing understandings of how God’s Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture.

For the most part, Isaiah 40-66 describes a time some 150 years after what is described in Isaiah 1-39, and the prophet behind the first section of Isaiah could have written the last section only through divinely-given foreknowledge. For our purposes, we’ll assume that this is, in fact, how the prophecies came to be, and that the entire book is the work of one author.

The first chapters of Isaiah describe the situation in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century B.C. During this period, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered and dispersed, never to be seen again, and Isaiah warned the people of Judah that similar

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 2, 2018, the first Sunday of Advent.

² As you know, our celebration focuses on Jesus’ birth on December 25. According to what I find the most compelling evidence, though, Jesus was actually born on June 2, 2 B.C., and the Magi came to Bethlehem on December 25 of that year. See www.bethlehemstar.net.

judgment would come to them unless they turned from their many sins and returned to God in heartfelt repentance. Sadly, such repentance did not take place, and the southern kingdom was taken into what we know as “the Babylonian Captivity” in 587 B.C.

The second part of Isaiah describes the situation of the exiles in the 6th century B.C. as they despaired in that future exile. This part of the prophecy assumes that despair, but brings into it a message of Hope, Forgiveness, and Redemption. The last part of Isaiah contains some of the best theological thinking in the Older Testament, and some of the most familiar verses come at the very beginning, in the subject of our study, chapter 40.

Comparisons are often made between Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 6, which contains Isaiah’s famous “Temple Vision” of “the LORD high and lifted up.” In Isaiah 6, Isaiah was commissioned to bring a message of pain and judgment. In Isaiah 40, he was commissioned to bring a message of hope and restoration. With this as background, let’s look at today’s text.

The first section of Isaiah 40, verses 1-11, has four subsections, each of which contains a command. The first subsection is the first two verses:

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and announce to her that her time of forced labor is over,³ her iniquity is pardoned, and she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

The command in this first section is “to **comfort**” God’s people. In English, it is not obvious that this command is plural. This plural most likely indicates that the command was given to what is known as “the Divine Council,” which was also the context for Isaiah’s first commissioning in chapter 6 and the beginning of the book of Job.⁴ The concept of the Divine Council is a most interesting one, and I will post additional material about it with the online version of this sermon; but the Council is not our primary concern this morning.

The idea here is that the members of the Divine Council, sometimes referred to as “the Watchers” or “the Holy Ones,”⁵ who are sometimes agents of God’s judgment, are now commissioned to comfort “Jerusalem,” which represents the despairing exiles of Judah in Babylon. The message is that their punishment has been completed and their sin that resulted in that punishment has been forgiven.

This is Good News; but the exiles have a hard time believing it. They are still in exile. Jerusalem is in ruins. All that remains of that once-proud city and that once-prosperous kingdom are a few poor and ragged survivors, strangers in a strange land.

To such a discouraged and disbelieving group the second section of our text reaffirms this Good News:

A voice of one crying out: “Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness; make a straight highway for our God in the desert. Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will be leveled; the uneven ground will become smooth and the rough places, a plain. And the glory of the LORD will appear, and all humanity together will see it, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (vv. 3-5).

³ The KJV has “her warfare is accomplished,” which is a possible rendering, but not supported by the best manuscripts.

⁴ See Michael Heiser, *Supernatural: What the Bible teaches about the Unseen World and why It Matters* (Bellingham, WA, Lexham Press, 2015).

⁵ See Daniel 4:23.

We are perhaps most familiar with these words as they appear in Handel's *Messiah*, and we're not told who the speaker is, but it would appear that this command is relayed by one of the members of the Divine Council. The command of this second section is "Prepare the Way of the LORD!"

The background for this section comes at least in part from the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was among the first group deported to Babylon, some years before Jerusalem was destroyed, and he prophesied among that group of exiles about the judgment that was about to fall upon their beloved capital city.

In the last chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy, the glory of the Lord departs from the Temple and from the city prior to its destruction. Now the Good News from Isaiah's prophetic vision is that the glory of the Lord is about to return to Jerusalem and to the Temple, which will then be rebuilt.

Because of the awful mess in which the exiles found themselves, if they were to be delivered, God would have to do it. But the message of this section is that when God does decide to restore His people, nothing the Babylonians can do will be able to prevent it. God's purpose of redemption will be achieved!

The third section of our text appears to be a conversation, but it's not altogether clear how it fits together. This is one way it might go:

Voice One: *A voice was saying, "Cry out!"*

Voice Two: *Another said, "What should I cry out?"*

Voice One: *"All humanity is grass, and all its goodness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fade, when the breath of the LORD blows on them; indeed, the people are grass."*

Voice Two: *"The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever."*

It looks like the first voice is a member of the Divine Council, while the second voice may be the prophet himself. The command of this third section is "Cry Out!"; and that cry is two-fold. In the first place, the cry is an affirmation of the transience of most aspects of our experience. Scripture reminds us that grass is "here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire" (Matthew 6:30). We know that flowers share their glory with us for only a very short time; and the Bible affirms that our own lives are like a vapor that appears and then vanishes (James 4:14).

But over against such transience, this third section cries out that "*the word of our God remains forever.*" God told us that "*My word that comes from my mouth will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do*" (Isaiah 55:11). And the author of Hebrews reminded us that "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8).

In the context of Isaiah 40, this third section provides a third affirmation that the Good News of God's comfort, forgiveness, and restoration is absolutely certain, no matter how fickle, faithless, and rebellious the children of Israel may be . . . or we after them.⁶

Each of these three sections has been Good News, but the fourth section may be the Best News of all:

⁶ Cp. 2 Timothy 2:13.

Zion, herald of good news, go up on a high mountain. Jerusalem, herald of good news, raise your voice loudly. Raise it, do not be afraid! Say to the cities of Judah, "here is your God!"

See, the LORD GOD comes with strength, and his power establishes his rule. His wages are with him, and his reward accompanies him. He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing (vv. 9-11).

The command of this fourth section is "Raise your voice loudly," or "**Shout!**"

The affirmation is repeated that the glory of God will indeed return to Jerusalem: "Say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" But there's more here than simply this.

For any faith that believes in a God who is both Good and Powerful, the Problem of Evil is the greatest challenge to such faith. The idea is that if God were Good, God would wish to prevent evil; and if God were Powerful, God would be able to do so. But evil does exist; so maybe God is not Good. Maybe God is not Powerful. And *maybe* God is *neither* Good nor Powerful. Such is the "problem of evil."

But notice that each of the "horns" of this dilemma is addressed in this fourth section. First is God's Power: "See, the LORD GOD comes with strength, and his power establishes his rule." There is no question of inability here, though God's purposes are sometimes unclear to us. **God's purposes will be achieved:** "My word that comes from my mouth will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do" (Isaiah 55:11).

And second, God's Goodness is beautifully and winsomely affirmed: "He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing." God's power is absolute; but this is not the power of an arbitrary despot. It is the power of a gentle and compassionate King. The second section of Isaiah 40, verses 12-26, to which we'll turn next week, will continue to affirm God's power; and the third section, verses 27-31, will beautifully affirm God's compassion.

This fourth section, reminiscent of the familiar images of the 23rd Psalm,⁷ ends our text as it began: "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and announce to her that her iniquity has been pardoned. The glory of the Lord returns to you!"

The message of today's text was originally sent to people who had lost nearly everything that had given them a sense of who they were. The impossible had happened. Their capital had been overrun and destroyed. Their homes and businesses had been taken. Their family members had been lost. They were strangers in a strange land. Could they ever dare to hope again? And the prophet's message was **YES! Hope On!! The King is coming!!!**

The flow of today's text reminds me of a litany my colleague, Rev. Joan Hockaday, wrote when we were both chaplains at Baylor Medical Center in Dallas in 1979. Joan and Tim Wisthoff and I share the fact that we were all born 68 years ago yesterday. But Joan and I were also born in the same hospital!

I've shortened her litany and redone it for two parts rather than its original four. Would you read this with me?

⁷ See also John 10:1-21.

“It was Night”

A Christmas Reading¹

One: It was night, and they were about their tasks, when an angel appeared to the shepherds and said,

Many: “Fear not . . . Good News . . . Great Joy . . . a Child is born . . . a Savior come . . . and humanity has found favor with God.”

One: It’s an old story . . . a pleasant thought . . . tucked neatly away in our minds—like Christmas wreaths in our attics—brought forth in due season

**Many: “But what of it?” we ask in our moments of honesty.
“Is this Savior seasonal, too?” we wonder . . . as we go about
our common tasks . . . on common days . . . in common places.**

One: Humanity all around . . . broken, bleeding, frightened, angry, dying.

Many: Good News? Great Joy?

One: Is our seasonal Savior unboxed with the tinsel, poured forth with a cup of cheer . . . an expected December visitor only? Is He ever very at home in our modern cities, in our hallowed halls of worship?

Many: Was the “Good News, Great Joy” only an announcement to an earlier people, a rural people, of the coming of modernization? Was He simply a man ahead of his time, a time that we have now realized, a time that lives very comfortably without Him?

One: Do we need “Good News?” Do we need “Great Joy?”

**Many: “Good News” to us is NO news; and “Great Joy” to us is NO pain.
And the best *we* can hope for is Absence.**

One: But is it possible that what we really need is not more Absence, but Presence? Is it possible that Jesus is a Presence, not seasonal, but eternal, One who invades our complexity and agony and death with Order, Meaning, Peace, and Life?

Many: Presence, not Absence!

One: Eternal, not seasonal!

Many: “It was night, and they were about their tasks,” the story goes

One: It IS night, in many ways, and we are about our tasks, our stories go

Many: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among US . . .*”

ALL: “GOOD News!” “GREAT Joy!”

¹ Written at Baylor University Medical Center by Joan Hockaday, 12.8.1979; revised by David Stancil 12.15.1989, 11.30.2018. Joan and I were born in the same hospital on the same day in 1950.

Notes on Michael S. Heiser, ***Supernatural: What the Bible teaches about the Unseen World – and why It Matters*** (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

A. The Divine Council

1. The Existence of the Council

- a. Psalm 82:1, 89:5-7
- b. Daniel 7:10
- c. Genesis 1:26-27
- d. Job 38:4-7

2. God's Purpose

- a. 2 Peter 1:4
- b. 1 John 3:1-2
- c. Revelation 2:26, 3:21

B. What Went Wrong

1. The Nephilim

- a. Genesis 6:1-5
- b. 2 Peter 2:4-6
- c. Jude 5-6
- d. 1 Peter 3:18-22
- e. Numbers 13:32-33
- f. Deuteronomy 2:10-11
- g. Isaiah 14:9-11
- h. 1 Samuel 17:4
- i. 2 Samuel 21:15-22

2. Babel

- a. Deuteronomy 4:19-20, 32:8-9
- b. 1 Kings 22:19
- c. Daniel 10:13, 20-21
- d. Deuteronomy 29:26, 32:17
- e. Psalm 82:6-7
- f. Ephesians 1:20-21, 3:10-11, 6:12
- g. Colossians 1:16, 2:15

C. The Solution

1. The Incarnation

- a. Leviticus 17:11
- b. Isaiah 9:6-7

2. The Secret/Mystery

- a. 1 Corinthians 2:7-8
- b. Matthew 17:22-23
- c. Luke 24:44-45
- d. Ephesians 3:10-11

3. The Temptation

- a. Matthew 4:1
- b. John 12:31
- c. Deuteronomy 4:19

4. Caesarea Philippi

- a. Matthew 16:15-18
- b. Mark 9:2-8
- c. Psalm 22:12-13

5. Caiaphas

- a. Daniel 7:13-14
- b. Matthew 26:59-66

6. The Harrowing of Hell

- a. Jude 1:6
- b. 1 Peter 3:18-22

7. Pentecost

- a. Acts 2:1-3
- b. Genesis 11:7
- c. Deuteronomy 32:8

D. The New Eden/Earth

- 1. Revelation 21:1-5

THE DIVINE COUNCIL

The Existence of the Council

Psalm 82:1 (NIV2011)

¹ *God presides in the **great assembly**; he renders judgment **among the “gods”**:*

Psalm 89:5-7 (NIV2011)

⁵ *The heavens praise your wonders, LORD, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones. ⁶ For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings? ⁷ **In the council of the holy ones** God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him.*

Daniel 7:10 (NIV2011)

¹⁰ *A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. **The court was seated**, and the books were opened.*

One of the most important verses in the Bible tips us off that both God and his council were in Eden. In **Genesis 1:26** God says, “let us make humankind in our image.” God announces his intention to a group. Who’s he talking to his heavenly host – his Council. He is not talking to the other members of the Trinity, because God cannot know something they don’t! And here the groupies addressing learns what God has decided to do. Unlike other divine council sessions we’ve seen, the members of God’s council don’t participate in this decision. When humankind is created in the next verse (**Genesis 1:27**), God is the only one creating (28-29).

God wanted a human family. He wanted to live on his creation, earth, with the people he had made. He wanted his unseen family and his human family to live with him and serve him. He wanted people to multiply and for all the earth to become like Eden. But when God forsook humanity at the Tower of Babel, he had no children – until he called Abraham. Israel was God’s new family. It was time to get back to the original plan. As Adam and Eve had been God’s earthly imagers, Israel would now fill that role (70).

God’s Purpose

God’s original intention in Eden was to merge his human family with his divine family, the heavenly sons of God who were here before creation (**Job 38: 7– 8**). He didn’t abandon that plan at the fall. Christian, you will be made divine, like one of God’s Elohim children, like Jesus himself (**1 John 3: 1– 3**). Theologians refer to the idea by many labels. The most common is glorification. Peter referred to it as becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (**2 Peter 1: 4**). John put it this way: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (**1 John 3: 1**, emphasis added). (147)

The temple was also decorated like the Garden of Eden, filled with images of lush vegetation and animals (**1 Kings 6-7**). Flowers, palm trees, lions, and pomegranates were carved into its architecture. It was a visual reminder of the place where God first come to earth to live with his human family (81).

WHAT WENT WRONG

Humanity sinned and was expelled from God's presence. Eden was shut down. The divine enemy, the Serpent, was banished— cast or cut down— from God's presence to earth, the place where death reigns, where life is not everlasting. He became lord of the dead, and therefore had claim to every human being who would ever live— because they sin, and sin's wages is death (**Romans 6: 23**). (97)

THE NEPHILIM

The evil contagion spreading through humanity in **Genesis 6:5** is linked to the story in **Genesis 6:1-4** about the sons of God fathering their own earthly children known as Nephilim. Peter and Jude write about the angels who sinned before the flood (**2 Peter 2:4-6; Jude 5-6**).

1 Peter 3:18-22 (NIV2011)

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Demons are the departed spirits of dead Nephilim killed before and during the flood. They roamed the earth harassing humans and seeking re-embodiment. In the books of the Bible that followed Genesis, descendants of the Nephilim of Genesis 6:1-4 are called and Anakim and Rephaim (**Numbers 13:32-33; Deuteronomy 2:10-11**). Some of these Rephaim show up in the underworld realm of the dead (**Isaiah 14:9-11**) where the Serpent was cast down. New Testament writers would later call that place hell (40-41).

One of these dark powers is the lord of the dead. He has rightful claim to humanity, since his deception of Adam and Eve resulted in the loss of immortality. And that was his goal – the extermination of Yahweh's people (64).

During the days of Moses and Joshua, some of the opponents they run into when trying to claim the promised land were scattered giant clans (**Deuteronomy 2-3**). These giants went by various names. In **Numbers 13:32-33** they are called the Anakim. They are specifically said to be living descendants of the Nephilim – the offspring of the sons of God back in Genesis 6:1-4. The Old Testament tells us Israelites were fighting these oversized enemies until David's time. He took out Goliath (**1 Samuel 17**), and some of his men killed Goliath's brothers to finally end the threat (**2 Samuel 21:15-22**). (41).

The Anakim Giants the Israelites by saw in Canaan were the descendants of the Nephilim, the sinister spawn of the sons of God and the daughters of humankind in Genesis 6:1-4 (89).

The Israelites eventually made their way into a region known as Bashan. The place had a terrifying reputation. In ancient literature outside the Bible, Bashan was known as "the place of the serpent." Two of its major cities, Ashtoroth and Edrei, both mentioned in connection with this journey (**Deuteronomy 1:4; Joshua 13:12**), were considered

gateways to the underworld realm of the dead in the context of Israel supernatural worldview, God had led the Israelites to the gates of hell. And that wasn't all.

God had brought the Israelites there to encounter two Kings, Sihon and Og. Those two kings were Amorites (**Deuteronomy 3:2-3, 31:4**) and rulers of what the Bible calls the Rephaim. As **Deuteronomy 2:11** ominously noted, the Anakim were also counted as Rephaim. God, through Moses, had led the people to another area occupied by the same sort of giants that had frightened the Israelite spies into unbelief years earlier (**Numbers 13:32-33**), the event that caused the 40 years of wandering.

Israel won the day against Sihon and Og. And it is here that we get our first taste of why the conquest of the promised land at times involved in annihilating the entire populations of the cities that were home to the giant Rephaim were “devoted to destruction” (Deuteronomy 3:6). The goal was not revenge. The goal was to ensure the elimination of the Nephilim bloodlines. To the Israelites, the giant clan bloodlines were demonic, having been produced by rebellious, fallen divine beings.

BABEL

We learned in **Psalms 82** that these lesser gods became corrupt. They allowed injustice. People came to worship them instead of the Most High God. Thus they became enemies of God and his people, Israel. Since some of those nations were within the land of Canaan, which God purposed to give to his nation Israel after the Exodus, Moses and the Israelites believed the people who occupied those lands were their mortal enemies and their gods would do all they could to destroy Israel (88).

You can only understand the rationale and motive of the conquest accounts when you see them through the supernatural world view of an Israelite. When God decided at Babel that he no longer wanted to direct relationship with the people of the nations, he assigned the members of his divine council, the sons of God, to govern them (**Deuteronomy 4:19-20, 32:8-9**). Afterward, he called Abraham and enabled him and his wife Sarah to have a child and parent Isaac), from whom the people of Israel would come.

When God divided up the nations, they were divided among the sons of God. God allotted the nations to members of his divine council. This is the Bible's explanation for why other nations came to worship other gods. Until Babel, God wanted a relationship with all humanity. But the rebellion at Babel changed that. God decided to let members of his divine council govern the other nations. (49).

Through Moses, God had warned his own people not to worship “the host of heaven” (**Deuteronomy 4:19-20**), a label found elsewhere for the members of the divine council (**1 Kings 22:19**). We saw earlier in **Psalms 82:1** that God had assembled the gods of the Council. The full Psalm tells us why. The gods of the nations had ruled those nations unjustly – in ways that were contrary to the true God's wishes in the principles of justice. God indicted them as soon as the meeting began: “*how long will you hand down unjust decisions by favoring the wicked?*” (**Psalms 82:2**). (51)

Ground is either holy, meaning dedicated to Yahweh, or it is the domain of another god. This worldview is reflected in many places in the Bible. For instance, in the Old Testament the book of Daniel refers to foreign nations being ruled by divine “princes” (**Daniel 10:13, 20-21**). When David was running from King Saul, he was forced out of Israel into Philistine territory and in **1 Samuel 26:19**, he cried, “*they have driven me out*

from the Lord's land to a country where I can only worship foreign gods." David wasn't switching gods. He wasn't denying the God was present everywhere. But Israel was holy ground the place that belong to the true God. David was stuck in the domain of another god (52).

Once we realize the gods of the Old Testament are real, then the meaning of God's command to have no other god before Yahweh, the God of Israel, comes into focus. The command isn't about not giving attention to money or boats or cars. It's about God's jealous love for his people. In other words, the command actually means what it says.

Sadly, the Israelites wound up worshipping the gods "not allotted to them" (**Deuteronomy 29:26, 32:17**) instead of seeking the true God. God's reaction was swift and harsh (**Psalm 82:6-7**): "I say, *"you are gods; you are all children of the Most High. But you will die like mere mortals and fall like every other ruler"*. The gods would lose their immortality (**Psalm 82:7**) and die like men (51).

The insanity of loyalty to any god other than the God of all gods is hard to miss. The awfulness of living with the consequences of how God judged the gods and their people (the "nations") is also pretty obvious. We were once disinherited, enslaved to the corruption and exploitation of other gods. We were, as Paul says, alienated from God and outsiders to his covenant love (**Ephesians 2: 12**). We were lost, enslaved to darkness, enemies of God in the service to unseen overlords (**Ephesians 4: 18; Colossians 1: 21**).

It's no accident that we see the same kind of thinking in the New Testament Paul uses a range of terms for hostile divine beings: rulers, authorities, powers, thrones (**Ephesians 1:20-21, 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 1:16, 2:15**). What do these terms have in common? They were all well-known terms used to describe geographical rulers (53).

Our story so far: God cast aside the nations and their peoples at Babel the lesser gods assigned to them took dominion (**Deuteronomy 32:8-9**). When God started over with Abraham, it was clear that he planned to one day reclaim the nations through the influence of Israel (**Genesis 12:3**). But the gods of the nations would have to be forced to surrender their power and worship (**Psalm 82:6-8**). That meant conflict – in both the seen and unseen realms. As soon as there was an Israel, she was in the crosshairs of the gods (67).

Satan's loss of his claim over the lives of the children of Adam was not the only loss he suffered at the cross. His cohorts in rebellion, the supernatural gods (Elohim) of the nations, would see their domains begin to vanish. The supernatural gods had been assigned those nations by the Most High, the God of Israel (**Deuteronomy 4: 19– 20; 32: 8– 9**). We are not told when they became enemies of God, but they did. They had turned God's own people, Israel, away from worshipping him to instead sacrifice to them (**Deuteronomy 17: 1– 3; 29: 26– 27; 32: 17**). **Psalm 82**, the psalm we looked at in chapter 2 to introduce the divine council, tells us these Elohim abused their power and rewarded evil. (122-123)

Another implication of the passages of Scripture we've examined is that the notion of demonic strongholds is biblical. We aren't given a full description of demonic zones or turf boundaries, or even a spiritual pecking order for the dark side. We are told, however, that the unseen powers see earth as their domain. We're told those powers resist God's kingdom and don't want people to become part of God's plan to spread his good rule everywhere. That means we should expect resistance we can't explain with

logic or empirical evidence and we can't defeat it on our own. God has given us his Spirit and unseen agents of his own to help us further his mission (**1 Corinthians 3: 16; 6: 19; Hebrews 1: 13; 1 John 4: 4**). (134)

THE SOLUTION

THE INCARNATION

The human story, apart from God's presence, is the story of failure. This is because humanity is lost since the fall. All humans are imperfect and estranged from God. No human leader could be trusted with starting and maintaining God's kingdom. They would resist loyalty to God alone. They would go their own way. Humans would sin, fail, and join the lord of the dead, God's great enemy. But God's vision of sharing the blessing of being steward-kings over a new Eden couldn't happen without humans. And the only way humans would ever be able to hold up their end of God's plan would be for them to be made new again. The curse of the fall must be lifted. And for that, God had a plan.

Blood sacrifices had a theological purpose – they introduced the concept of substitution. Since blood was the life force (**Leviticus 17:11**), the taking of an animal life taught the lesson that approaching God on any terms except his own meant death the blood of the sacrifice was a merciful substitute to rectify and Israelites defiled, unclean state. The teaching point was that God was preserving the Israelites life by substituting the sacrifice (80).

The cause of the Israelites' failure was disobedience and faithlessness on the part of God's people. Humans are weak. We might wonder why God bothers with us. But if we look back to Eden, we know why. God had committed himself to humanity. We are his imagers, and his earthly family. His original plan for ruling the earth included us. For God to cast aside human participation and his Council rule on earth would send a message that he's unable to make it work or that it was a bad idea to begin with. God is not in capable of achieving his own goals. God doesn't make mistakes.

It was time for a new approach to the old problem of sin and failure. humanity could not be trusted with reviving the Edenic kingdom rule. Only God himself can do what needed to be done. Only God can meet the obligations of his own covenants. But humanity would not be set aside. Instead, God would have to become man. God would have to fulfill the Law and the covenants himself and then take upon himself the penalty for all human failure. But pulling off that unthinkable solution meant that it would have to be kept secret from everyone, including the intelligent supernatural beings hostile to his purposes. That wasn't going to be easy (96).

THE SECRET/MYSTERY

God needed a man who was more than man— someone who could resist temptation, who would always obey, who was fit for kingship, who could reverse the curse of death by dying and then rising again by his own power. All of that could happen in only one way: God himself would become man. God would fulfill his own plan, as a man, for all humankind, and restore Eden. Only when humans were forgiven and made divine like Jesus through resurrection power (**1 John 3: 1– 3**) could Eden be a reality. But there was a problem. If the plan were discovered — that the man who was God was here to die and rise again to ensure that God's original vision would be restored — the forces of

darkness wouldn't fall for it. This is precisely what Paul said in a letter to the Corinthian church:

But we speak the hidden wisdom of God in a mystery, which God predestined before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew. For if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Corinthians 2: 7–8 LEB)

Who is Paul talking about? The word rulers can refer to human authorities— such as Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders— but Paul also has divine, demonic powers in view (**Ephesians 2: 2**). God's enemies, human and divine, had to be kept in the dark. Everything depended on the death and resurrection of the God-man. But how do you keep that a secret?

Only by becoming a man could God ensure that a human king from the line of David would rule over his people without falling into sin and straying spiritually. Only if that king died in the place of his people and rose from the dead could God rightly judge sin and provide salvation all at the same time. Only by the messiah's death and resurrection would fallen people still have a place in God's family council, ruling in that renewed Edenic kingdom, as originally planned. But think about all that required: Jesus had to somehow make sure the supernatural powers of darkness manipulated men to kill him— without understanding what they were really doing. As Paul had said to the Corinthians (**1 Corinthians 2: 6– 8**), if they really knew what the results were going to be, they never would have crucified the Lord. The life and ministry of Jesus may make more sense when viewed against that backdrop. (107-108)

The God-man upon whom the restoration of Eden depended was, of course, the Messiah— Jesus of Nazareth. But did it surprise you that I suggested that the Messianic plan was secret? Can't we just read the Old Testament and see the whole plan? No, we can't. Believe it or not, there is no verse in the Old Testament that uses the word messiah of a man who was actually God and who would die for the sins of humanity. Not even **Isaiah 53:11** with its portrait of a "suffering servant." The word "Messiah" never appears in that chapter, and elsewhere in Isaiah, the "servant" refers to the nation of Israel, not an individual savior (**Isaiah 41: 8; 44: 1– 2, 21; 45: 4; 48: 20; 49: 3**). And the word *messiah*, which means "anointed," nearly always refers only to David or one of his descendants who reigned as king after him.

Actually, the proof of what I'm saying— that the profile of a divine messiah who would die and rise again is hard to find in the Old Testament— is apparent in the New Testament. Think of how the disciples responded to Jesus when he told them he was going to Jerusalem to die. The announcement mystified and distressed them (**Matthew 17: 22– 23; Mark 9: 30– 32**). They didn't respond by saying, "Oh, right, we read that in the Scriptures." Peter even rebuked Jesus for saying it (**Matthew 16: 21– 23**).

The disciples had no sense, no inkling, of this new plan of God's. They thought of Jesus only as the son of David and rightful heir to his throne, someone who performed miracles just as the Old Testament prophets did. Even after the resurrection, the disciples had to have their minds supernaturally opened to see a suffering Messiah.

After Jesus had risen from the dead, he appeared to them and said: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. (**Luke 24: 44– 45**) The "new plan" of God's— that

he would die and then rise from the dead to reverse the curse of the fall— isn't at all evident in the Old Testament. Instead, clues are scattered throughout the Old Testament in dozens of places. Never is it all revealed in one place.

The Messianic profile is only clear in hindsight— and even then only to someone who already knows what to look for and expect. Intelligent supernatural evil beings, of course, knew the prophesied son of David had arrived (**Matthew 8: 28– 29; Luke 4: 31– 35**). That much they could grasp from the Old Testament. But nothing the demons ever say creates the impression that they understood Jesus was come to earth to die and rise again, reversing the curse.

As Paul said, had they and Satan understood that, they would never have moved people like Judas to betray Jesus to those who wanted him dead. The Devil and those aligned with him are lots of things, but they aren't morons. They were duped into killing Jesus, just as God had planned. They launched the series of events that would lead to their own demise. It was divinely-designed misdirection. (98-102)

THE TEMPTATION

After Jesus' baptism, he was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit to confront Satan (**Matthew 4: 1; Mark 1: 12; Luke 4: 1– 13**). That the Devil came to tempt Jesus tells us Satan knew who Jesus was— he was the messiah on a mission to re-install God's "home rule" on earth. After all, the "anointed one" (messiah) would be a king in the line of David. Satan, the "ruler of this world" (**John 12: 31**), understood Jesus would set his sights on Satan's dominion — the nations God had cast aside at the Tower of Babel before creating Israel (**Deuteronomy 4: 19– 20; 32: 8– 9**).

Satan's offer reveals that he hadn't yet realized God's plan required Jesus' death. Jesus didn't tip him off, either. He didn't explain his refusal. He simply told Satan to get lost. God would take back what was his when and how he wanted. The mission of Jesus wasn't just about ruling all the nations. It was about rebuilding a family. Including in that family people from all nations, not just Israel, meant that sin must be atoned for. As he'd originally planned, God's rule would involve his children. The cross was essential to redeeming humanity and therefore to putting God's plan into place. Jesus wasn't going to be tricked— but the Devil would be, in due time. (109-110)

CAESAREA PHILIPPI

At the fall, humanity lost eternal life with God and earned instead a fate of death and eternal separation from God. The lord of the dead— the Serpent, known as Satan and the Devil— had claim over humanity. Every human would join him in the realm of the dead. But God had other ideas. The secret plan to send Jesus to pay the penalty for humanity's sin would be a frontal assault on the gates of hell. The lord of the dead and his forces would not be able to withstand the kingdom of God.

After three years of preaching about the coming kingdom of God, showing people God's love, and demonstrating what life in an Edenic world would look like, Jesus began to prepare for the end— for his real purpose. Just before what would become his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus took the disciples to the far north of Israel. He needed to provoke the crucifixion. He couldn't have picked a better place to throw down the gauntlet to the supernatural powers.

Jesus brought the disciples to a place called Caesarea Philippi. But that was its Roman name. In Old Testament times the region was called Bashan. We've talked about it before, in chapter 9. Bashan was considered the gateway to the realm of the dead—the gates of hell. Caesarea Philippi is situated at the foot of Mount Hermon, the place where, in Jewish thinking, the sons of God came to earth in the rebellion described in **Genesis 6: 1– 4**.

Psalm 22: The creepy part of this description is the fierce bulls from Bashan. As we noted earlier, in Old Testament times, Bashan was ground zero to demonic gods and the realm of the dead. The area was a leading center for the worship of Baal, symbolized by bulls and cows. "Bulls from the land of Bashan" is a reference to demons, the powers of darkness.

In a nutshell, in Old Testament times Bashan and Hermon were ground zero for the evil cosmic powers. It was at this place that Jesus asked his well-known question, "Who do you say that I am?" (**Matthew 16: 15**). Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Jesus commended him and added: Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (vv. 17– 18)

The identification of the "rock" Jesus referred to has been debated for centuries. The key to understanding the term is the area's geography. Caesarea Philippi sits in the far northern region of Bashan. In Old Testament times, this area was thought to contain gateways to the realm of the dead. Caesarea Philippi sits at the foot of a mountain. The "rock" is that mountain. The "gates of hell" marks the very place where Jesus and his disciples were standing. Jesus was challenging the powers of darkness.

In essence, in that passage in Matthew 16, Jesus goes to the Devil's front door and challenges his claim. Jesus wanted to provoke Satan. Why? Because it was time for Jesus to die to propel God's secret plan into motion. As if that verbal challenge wasn't enough, Jesus went one step further. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that the next event in the ministry of Jesus was the transfiguration. **Mark 9: 2– 8** reads: *Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain, where they were alone.*

As they looked on, a change came over Jesus, and his clothes became shining white— whiter than anyone in the world could wash them. Then the three disciples saw Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus. Peter spoke up and said to Jesus, "Teacher, how good it is that we are here! We will make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He and the others were so frightened that he did not know what to say. Then a cloud appeared and covered them with its shadow, and a voice came from the cloud, "This is my own dear Son— listen to him!" They took a quick look around but did not see anyone else; only Jesus was with them. (GNT)

The transfiguration takes place on Mount Hermon. Jesus picked this very spot to reveal to Peter, James, and John exactly who he was—the embodied glory of God. He was putting Satan and the powers of darkness on notice: I've come to earth to take back what is mine. The kingdom of God is at hand. In effect: "I'm here— now do something about it." It's no accident that immediately after the transfiguration Jesus turned toward Jerusalem and began telling his disciples he was going to die there. They didn't want to hear it. But Jesus had baited Satan and the rest of the evil powers into action.

There would be a sense of urgency to get rid of him. And that's just what Jesus wanted. His death was the key to everything. (112-115)

In our own time, the imagery was captured in all its eerie repulsion by C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. No one who has read that book or seen the movie can forget Aslan humbly surrendering his life to the delighted hordes of the White Witch on the Stone Table. And just as Jesus had utterly outwitted Satan, Aslan had played the White Witch for a fool. What evil misperceived as the moment of triumph turned out to be its own irreversible defeat.

CAIAPHAS

Daniel continues narrating his vision: *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.* (**Daniel 7: 13– 14**)

“Son of Man” is a phrase used many times in the Old Testament. It should be no surprise that it speaks of a human. The surprise is how else this human is described in this passage. **Daniel 7: 13** describes a man coming on the clouds to the Ancient of Days. Why is that a big deal? Because everywhere else that description occurs in the Old Testament, it was used only of God himself (**Isaiah 19: 1; Deuteronomy 33: 26; Psalm 68: 32– 33, 104: 1– 4**). But in **Daniel 7**, God was already in the scene as the Ancient of Days. It's as if, in his vision, Daniel sees a “second God” who is also a man—something like the way Christians believe in God as more than one person.

That's precisely the point. As Jesus stood before Caiaphas at his trial in **Matthew 26**, his life hanging in the balance, he hit a nerve by appealing to this idea: Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’ ” And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” But Jesus remained silent.

And the high priest said to him, “*I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.*” Jesus said to him, “*You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.*” Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “*He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?*” They answered, “*He deserves death.*” (Matthew 26: 59– 66).

In what seems like a pointless answer to a clear question, Jesus quoted **Daniel 7: 13** in response to Caiaphas. Do you want to really know who I am, Caiaphas? Listen carefully. The reaction is immediate. Caiaphas understood in an instant that Jesus was claiming to be the second God figure of Daniel 7: 13— the human who was described in a way only God was described in the Old Testament. He was claiming to be God in human form. That was blasphemy — and grounds for a death sentence. But Jesus, of course, knew that. He had no interest in protecting himself. He knew he must die to restore God's kingdom, bring believers into God's family, and reclaim the nations from

the evil principalities and powers who controlled the nations God rejected at Babel. And die he did. (118-121)

The messaging of **Daniel 7: 13– 14** is clear— when the Son of Man receives the kingdom, it will be the beginning of the end for the supernatural powers of darkness. Jesus received the kingdom at his resurrection. God “*raised Christ from death and seated him at his right side in the heavenly world. Christ rules there above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords; he has a title superior to all titles of authority in this world and in the next*” (**Ephesians 1: 20– 21** GNT).

Before the cross, Satan had eternal claim on our souls. All humans die— and so, go to the realm of the dead, his domain. And there we would remain— were it not for the sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection. Through faith in his work on the cross, we are raised with him. As we saw in the previous chapter, Satan was expelled from God’s presence when the kingdom began on earth (**Luke 10: 18**). God would have no more of his accusations against believers. He had no more right to our souls. (124-125)

THE HARROWING OF HELL

Jude 1:6 (NIV2011)

⁶ And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.

1 Peter 3:18-22 (NIV2011)

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

The point Peter wanted to get across was that when Jesus died, he descended to the realm of the dead and had a message for the fallen divine beings there. When they saw Jesus enter the place of the dead, they were likely to think their fellow demons had won and they would be getting out of jail soon. Instead, Jesus told them they wouldn’t see him for long— he would rise again. It was all part of God’s plan. They hadn’t won— they were still under judgment and as doomed as ever. That’s why this odd passage ends the way it does, with Jesus “gone into heaven” and seated “at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (**1 Peter 3: 22**).

Why does Peter connect all of this to baptism? In Peter’s mind, Jesus’ death and resurrection— complete with an announcement to the demonic powers of his victory — was symbolized in baptism. Baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (**Romans 6: 1– 11**). For Peter, baptism “corresponds” to all this because it is “an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (**1 Peter 3: 21**).

In essence, baptism was a loyalty oath and a message to the demonic powers (as well as any people present) of just whose side you were on in the spiritual war. Ancient Christians understood this better than we do today. Early church baptismal rites included a renunciation of Satan and his angels because of this passage. (142-144) – Islam Today . . .

PENTECOST

The Tower of Babel incident was what gave rise to God’s decision to scatter the nations and put them under the authority of other gods (**Deuteronomy 4: 19– 20; 32: 8– 9**). At first glance there doesn’t seem to be much connection between that event and what happened in **Acts 2**. But in the original languages, there are clear connections between the two. Two key items in Acts 2 connect its events to Babel.

First, the flaming tongues are described as “divided,” and second, the crowd, composed of Jews from all the nations, are said to have been “confused.” In English, that may not seem particularly convincing. Luke is writing in Greek, and the Greek words he used here translated as “divided” and “confusion” come from **Genesis 11: 7** and **Deuteronomy 32: 8**, both of which describe the division of the languages and nations at Babel and the resulting confusion.

The “rushing wind” associated with the arrival of the Spirit is a familiar description of the presence of God in the Old Testament (**2 Kings 2: 1, 11; Job 38: 1; 40: 6**). Fire is also familiar in descriptions of God (**Ezekiel 1: 4; Isaiah 6: 4, 6; Daniel 7: 9; Exodus 3: 2; 19: 18; 20: 18**). It’s clear from those references that God was present at the event and behind what was going on. His intention was to launch his campaign to take back the nations from the lesser gods he assigned to the nations (**Deuteronomy 4: 19– 20; 32: 8– 9**) but who became his enemies (Ps. 82).

God’s tool for doing that was the words of the disciples— hence the imagery of tongues. God enabled the Jewish followers of Jesus to speak to the rest of the Jews gathered at Pentecost— who lived in all the nations under the dominion of enemy gods. When they heard the gospel and believed, they would go back to their nations and tell others about Jesus.

Think about what happened at Pentecost. The Spirit came as God so often had come in the Old Testament, with rushing wind and fire. The confusion of having multiple languages (which was a result of Babel) was removed when the flaming tongues enabled the disciples to speak in the languages of the Jews from all across the world gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration. Three thousand of them believed the message about Jesus (**Acts 2: 41**). Those new believers who embraced Jesus as messiah would carry that message back to their home countries — the nations scattered at Babel.

THE NEW EARTH/EDEN

Many Christians have an inadequate view of the afterlife. Scripture doesn’t tell us everything about what it will be like, but some aspects are certain. We aren’t going to be playing harps or singing endlessly while floating around on clouds. We won’t just be sitting on celestial couches chatting with departed loved ones or well-known believers from the past. Rather, we will be living the life Eden offered— we will be busy enjoying and caring for what God has made, side by side with the divine beings who remained loyal to him. Heaven and earth will no longer be separate places.

Knowing our destiny ought to mold our thinking in the here and now. As Paul said, “What no one ever saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God prepared for those who love him” (**1 Corinthians 2: 9** GNT). (160-161)

The Christian life is really about grasping two concepts: our adoption into God’s family— which means Jesus is our brother, and that God loves us like he loves Jesus— and our purpose in God’s plan to restore his kingdom on earth. We are, and will be, God’s new divine council. He is our Father. We are his children, destined to live where he lives forever. We are his coworkers, tasked with helping him release those still owned by the lord of the dead and held captive by unseen powers of darkness. That is what the Bible is about, from Eden to Eden. That is your destiny. Your life now is not about earning your place in God’s family. That cannot be earned. It’s a gift. Your life now is showing appreciation for your adoption, enjoying it, and getting others to share it with you. (154)