

## June 11 Lesson: God's Kingdom of Peace

### Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 11, 2023  
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25

#### Key Verse:

*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.*  
(Isaiah 65:25)

#### Lesson Aims

- To introduce the features of an end-time vision and its purpose
- To explore the theme of God's new creation and a new Jerusalem
- To reflect on the curse associated with the fall of humankind and what its removal looks like
- To imagine a world without war, conflict, oppression, and antagonism
- To fill our minds with images of what God's peaceable reign looks like within us and among us
- To commit ourselves to becoming a part of the change we want to see in the world

#### An End-Time Vision of the Reign of God

We are continuing the Summer Quarter's study of "The Righteous Reign of God." The reign of God is one of the grand themes that is emphasized, repeated, and developed throughout scripture. When we talk about the reign of God, we are talking about the same thing as the kingdom of God. For this reason, it is helpful to use the terms "kingdom of God" and "reign of God" interchangeably. This reminds us that the kingdom of God is not a static sort of destination, but the kingdom of God is the very dynamic *reign* of God. We're being invited to recognize, experience, and join in a movement that is ongoing, active, and flowing from God, the Ruler of the universe. As believers, we're subjects of the world-wide reign and rule of God.

As Christians, we should have keen interest in the righteous reign of God because Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than any other single subject. The central invitation of the gospel is to repent and believe the gospel of the kingdom of God. We do not start in the New Testament however to learn about the reign of God. The prophets shed a lot of light on this subject, and they do so rather dramatically.

We began last week looking at words from the Book of Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah is known for being filled with visions of the future. The first 39 chapters present a series of warnings focused on the events that unfolded in the 8th Century B.C., but God's calls to repentance are interlaced

with hopeful, divine visions that were intended to encourage and energize God's people. Divine visions of God's reign have the power to do this.

The next 16 chapters (Isaiah 40-55) jump ahead to the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., addressing a new group of God's people: the exiles held captive in Babylon. In this section, God shows them visions of their eventual restoration and return home from captivity. Our lesson last week came from this section of Isaiah. At the center of this hopeful passage of scripture was the news, "Your God reigns!"

The final 11 chapters of Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66) focus on a more distant future. The vision in today's scripture can properly be called an end-time vision. It's called an end-time vision because what it foresees has not happened yet in human history. It's a vision of how the history between God and the human race will culminate. When everything God has promised comes to complete fulfillment what will it look like?

**Have you ever sat down and tried to think what it would look like if God got everything God wanted? What would it look like for you and your personal life? What would it look like for your community and your church? What it would look like for the least, the last, and the lost around you?**

### **God's Reign, a New Creation, and a New Jerusalem**

An end-time vision of God's reign shows us God's preferred future. We see what should have been from the beginning had things not gone seriously wrong. What if you could rewind and go back to the beginning? Although God's history does not rewind exactly, God does believe in beginning again.

**<sup>17</sup> For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.**

**<sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I am creating,  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy  
and its people as a delight.**

God created the original heavens and earth in the beginning. The symbol of God's good creation was Eden. Adam and Eve sinned in the garden paradise of Eden and were banished from Eden. They could not go back to Eden through the way they left it. The story of the Bible is essentially about the long and winding journey of redemption back to an Eden-like paradise, which is pictured at the end of the Book of Revelation. The vision in Revelation is of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. Our scripture in Isaiah is where the seeds of this vision are introduced.

Isaiah's announcement that God intends to create new heavens and a new earth constitutes the promise of a new creation. Consider the magnitude of this divine new beginning. It will amount to a new beginning that is so complete that the former things will no longer be remembered or even come to mind. The "former things" include the ways God's original creation was marred through sin and its consequences. This is what will no longer be remembered or even come to my mind. Imagine waking up in the new creation as if from a nightmare and discovering that the reality in which one lives is in God's grace and unconditional love and complete delight in you.

What does it mean to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight? The new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God at the end of Revelation is a picture of the Church. What would the original audience have heard? How would they think this picture of a new Jerusalem applied to them? It would have represented the restoration of their spiritual home and all that meant in terms of their spiritual identity, their sense of belonging, and the quality of their life together as God's people. It includes the renewed faithfulness of God's people. This vision includes the gladness and the eternal joy of God's people, as well as the sense of delight this brings to the heart of God concerning his people.

Notice the tenses and timing in verses 17 and 18. Our joyful response is in what is *about* to happen and in what God *is creating*. God is creating God's preferred future—what should have been from the beginning. What should have been *will someday be* with God's leading. In the meantime, there is a sense in which God is already creating the new reality. The vision tells us what God wants us to see even in the midst of sin, evil, and suffering. God is creating God's preferred future in the heart and lives of his people. The vision of what *will be* tells us what *could be now* when we live as faithful and obedient subjects in God's reign.

I love the affirmation of faith from The United Church of Canada that is included in the United Methodist Hymnal. It affirms that we are not alone, that the world in which we live belongs to God, that God is still creating it, and God has called the Church to be involved.

We are not alone; we live in God's world.

We believe in God:

    who has created and is creating,  
    who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,  
    to reconcile and make new,  
    who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:

    to celebrate God's presence,  
    to love and serve others,  
    to seek justice and resist evil,  
    to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
    our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

    God is with us.

We are not alone.

    Thanks be to God. Amen.

**What does it mean to you that the God who created it all is still creating? What is God still creating? How is God calling the Church to be involved? How is God calling you, personally, to be involved?**

### **The Removal of the Death-Dealing Curses Plaguing the Human Family**

In Genesis, when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, there were far-reaching consequences. The Lord told Adam and Eve that if they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil they would die. The serpent enticed Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, saying that they surely would not die, which was a half-truth of the worst kind. It is true that they did not die immediately, but their mortal nature became a prominent feature of their lives.

According to Genesis 3, the serpent became a snake whose offspring would forever present a mortal danger to humans and their children. Childbirth would be greatly complicated resulting not only in severe pain, but also introducing the specter of infant mortality and the emotional suffering associated with that. The ground was cursed so that thorns and thistles grew in the fields that Adam farmed to provide food for his family. This introduced toil into his life's vocation along with the constant threat in the generations to come of pestilence, famine, and starvation.

Also, shame and blame, with all of their death-dealing effects, were introduced into the relationship between Adam and Eve and God. Their son, Cain, killed his brother, Abel. Disproportionate vengeance killing quickly became the norm until God had to make the difficult decision to start the human race over again with Noah and his family. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah, God began his grand plan of redemption.

Remembering the curse that accompanied the fall of humankind helps us take in the full weight of the gracious announcement contained in the next verses of this vision.

**<sup>19</sup> I will rejoice in Jerusalem  
and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it  
or the cry of distress.**

**<sup>20</sup> No more shall there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime,  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.**

Notice how the effects of the fall are removed in the new creation, the new Jerusalem, God's divine new beginning. This vision foresees what lies at the end of the long road of redemption. It shows what it looks like when God's reign has spread completely throughout all facets of life. Infant mortality is a thing of the past. An incredibly long life will be the norm. All the death-

dealing effects of sin will be removed to the extent that the sound of weeping will no longer be heard throughout God's righteous reign.

The vision next moves to a world without war and conflict.

**<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
<sup>22</sup> They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat,  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
<sup>23</sup> They shall not labor in vain  
or bear children for calamity,  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—  
and their descendants as well.**

When war and conflict plague a nation as much as it did Israel and Judah, the words in verses 21 through 23 would speak volumes to God's people. How many times throughout the centuries had generations of God's people built houses and planted vineyards only for a foreign nation to come and displace them through war? War not only creates refugees, homelessness, and starvation, it wipes away the accumulated results of the work of one's hands. It means you never get to build something or plant something that you get to enjoy.

When a husband and wife consent to marry and to bring children into the world, they do not do so in order to bring them into a world of war and homelessness. Yet, numerous generations of God's people bore children only for war to come at the absolute worst time.

Think of the mental anguish associated with this experience. Think of the shared psychic memory of a people who had endured so much over spans of generations. Now, think of the impact of an announcement where all of this hardship is removed when God's reign spreads over and permeates through all. When the pall of war and oppression is lifted, will that not be a sign of a new creation?

People do not mind working with their hands when they are assured that their labors will be blessed. The first vocation given to humankind was when God commanded Adam to till and keep the earth. God gave this calling when Eden was perfect and before Adam had sinned with all of its devastating effects. In God's reign, all members of the human family have a role to play, but it makes all the difference in the world when they get to enjoy the fruits of their labors. They build houses that they get to inhabit and share. They get to plant vineyards and enjoy the fruits of their labors and share them. They bring children into a world where the specter of war and oppression has totally been lifted and removed.

Make no mistake, God is the Creator of the universe. God created the universe and is still creating. In the sense, though, that God gives us work to do alongside him, we can be said to be co-creators in the reign of God. We still live in a world with sin, conflict, and much evidence of oppression, but God invites us to work with him as subjects within his reign.

Isn't it great to know that "we are not alone" and that "we live in God's world"? We believe in a God who has not only created but is still creating. We also believe in a Ruler who is not like an absentee landlord. The God whom we worship and serve "has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new." The amazing thing is that the Word made flesh "works in us and others by the Spirit." Therefore, "we trust in God." In the world, "we are called to be the Church." Together, we "celebrate God's presence, love and serve others, seek justice and resist evil." We acknowledge and affirm our mighty Ally as we "proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope." We believe that "in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us—we are not alone." Thanks be to God. We are Easter people!

**What are examples you see of the death-dealing curse of sin? How does your view of the curse change when you practice empathy and widen the spotlight to include all the broken places where people live? What does the statement mean to you that God is not an absentee landlord? How would you persuade a skeptic who sees no evidence of God's involvement in the world?**

### **God's Kingdom of Peace**

Whenever we speak of God's peace, God's Shalom, we are talking not just about the absence of war and conflict, we are also talking about the presence of complete well-being and fulfillment. In other words, we are talking not just about the absence of something but the presence of something. An exercise we might engage in would be to go through today's study and make two columns. Both columns would represent the situation that results when God's reign breaks through into our present lives and when God's reign will one day be complete. In the first column, list what God says we will *not* experience in the reign of God—all the things that steal, kill, and destroy the abundant life God desires for us (John 10:10). In the second column, list all the wonderful things that we *will* experience in the reign of God. Both columns help us envision God's shalom.

God's peace fills the void in your life. Think about your prayer life. Your prayers contain two movements: 1) praise and thanksgiving for things already present in your life because of the Lord, and 2) petitions for God to grant that for which your heart longs to be present or at least present in greater measure. You could say that God's kingdom of peace corresponds to longings of our heart expressed in both praise and prayer. The next verse of our scripture speaks to this:

**<sup>24</sup> Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.**

Through prayer and praise, we form with our lips and our minds the longings of our heart. We strive to bring form to our thoughts, dreams, and attitudes concerning God's reign. We do this for our own spiritual formation. We do not live in fear, however, that we will miss out if we neglect to include something in our prayers. Before we call out our petitions in prayer, God already knows and answers. As we struggle sometimes to form our words and thoughts, God already hears. The reason is that God's reign responds to the purest longings of our heart.

Think of the Lord's Prayer. It is a kingdom prayer. We address God as our Father who "art in heaven." A kingdom prayer longs for it to be on earth as it is in heaven. To say "hallowed by thy name" is not just a declaration (holy is Your name) but a petition (holy be Your name). If we connect this petition to the words that follow, we are praying for God's name to be holy on earth as it is in heaven. We pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, and for God's will to be on earth as it is in heaven. With these words, we set the context for the rest that follows. We pray for daily bread. We pray for God's forgiveness for our sins, and we link the forgiveness that we desire to receive to the forgiveness we are willing to bestow on those who have sinned against us. Forgiveness, both the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness we give, is a part of God's shalom. Deliverance from evil is a part of God's reign. When we pray for God's leading to take us away from temptation, we are saying that we join God in doing our part to avoid temptation. In all this, we are praying for God's Shalom to reign over our lives.

The scripture we have been studying culminates with a vision moment unlike any other.

**25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together;  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
says the LORD.**

This is a vision of God's peaceable kingdom. It is an echo of the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. The law of the jungle is replaced with its polar opposite. A picture of mutual assured destruction or self-destruction (eat or be eaten) is replaced with a vision where no breathing creature is eating any other breathing creature. The pronouncement against the serpent goes to the very heart of the curse pronounced in Genesis 3 in the garden of Eden. In the new creation, there is a new beginning—a reverse of the curse.

When God says that they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, it does not mean that God's reign extends only so far as the boundaries of Mount Zion, or Jerusalem. The new creation extends around the globe. The "holy mountain" is code for the holy center of influence. The goal and extent of God's reign is for God to be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28). Jerusalem figures so large in the story of God's people in the Old Testament because it is the place of influence. In the New Testament, the New Jerusalem stands for the Church. In this vision, God is calling his Church to be an influence in the Reign of God.

This reminds me of the song "Let There Be Peace on Earth," which was written by Jill Jackson-Miller and Sy Miller in 1955. It was initially written for and sung by an international children's choir to promote peace among nations. The song had personal meaning for Jill Jackson-Miller, who had been suicidal after the failure of her former marriage. She later revealed that she wrote the song after discovering what she called the "life-saving joy of God's peace and unconditional love." The words that stand out in this song is the refrain that says, "let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

This is what God is calling us to do. Visions are meant to energize the recipients of the vision. We see what God wants. We believe that in the end, God gets what God wants. God wants us to want what God wants. We work with God believing that God will make our efforts worth it. In the case of peace, if peace begins with me, I can live in place of peace even while the world around me is in a state of chaos. If I am in a state of peace, this will get noticed by the people in my orbit. I can be a person of influence. I can cause ripples, which affect the people around me. If they buy in, they cause ripples still further out. This is how movements of the Spirit happen and how they are sustained.

**When you made the two columns mentioned above, what is it easier to list the soul-killing things that will not be in the reign of God or easier to list the wonderful things that will be in the reign of God? How is the balance in your prayer life between your praises and your petitions? Can you think of times when you did something good that caused a ripple, and the people who were affected, in turn, caused a ripple? How is God inviting you to be a part of the change you want to see in the world?**

### **Prayer**

Creator God, who is still creating; help us see what you are creating, that we might be a part of it and inspire others, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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