

June 4 Lesson: God Reigns

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

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 4, 2023
By Jay Harris**

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 52:7-12

Key Verse:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce "The Righteous Reign of God" as the theme for the Summer Quarter
- To recognize the "reign of God" as one of the grand themes of the Bible
- To link the activity of the "messenger" with the announcement of God's reign becoming more real
- To connect the reign of God with the God who prevails
- To learn how this good news for the exiles was good news for people of all nations
- To reflect on their return home as a way to return to God and a life of faithfulness
- To explore the relationship between the reign of God, the good news, and evangelism

Introduction to the Summer Quarter and our Theme

The theme for the Summer Quarter is "The Righteous Reign of God." One of the benefits of reading the whole Bible (which I recommend) is that you get to discover the running themes which are repeated, emphasized, and developed in scripture. The kingdom of God or reign of God is one of the grand themes running through scripture.

Just the size and scope of the reign of God makes it one of the central themes of the Bible. It is deep, wide, high, and long. It is deep in terms of its significance and weight, wide in terms of all that God's reign embraces and includes, high in terms of its heavenly and divine origins and sheer idealism, and long in terms of its beginnings in eternity past and all that culminates and continues in its eternal future.

I heard the story once of a preacher visiting a missionary in Africa and having the opportunity to go on a safari. At one point they circled a large elephant. The visitor asked the guide why the trip seemed to stall on this one elephant when there were clearly more animals to be seen. The guide said, "Our animals are so magnificent in Africa that they must be seen from many angles." The same can certainly be said of the reign of God. Every angle we will pursue in this study will have something to offer in our exploration of God's reign.

As is typical in a quarter's study, we will spend time in different parts of the Bible: a unit in the prophets, a unit in the teachings of Jesus, and a unit exploring letters of Paul to congregations in the New Testament Church. Through thirteen scripture passages we will gain various perspectives on the reign of God.

How much have you reflected on the theme of God's reign or the Kingdom of God? What do you look forward to learning?

A Startling Announcement to Be Spread

We begin our exploration of the reign of God with the first verse of our scripture passage, which is also the key verse.

**⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."**

This verse presents such a vivid picture. Notice it is not "how beautiful is the *voice* of the messenger," but "how beautiful...are the *feet* of the messenger." The emphasis is on the purposeful action of the messenger to cover territory, ascend mountains, and find the best vantage points to amplify and broadcast the message.

What is the message? The message is about peace. The messenger brings good news. It is an announcement of salvation. The message is that "*your* God reigns." The word "your" is significant because it recalls a special relationship between God and the people who considered their spiritual home address to be Zion.

Zion is the name of the temple mount, which is the center of Jerusalem, which is the spiritual center of the universe for Jews. This is the dilemma. The Jews who were hearing this announcement were not physically located in Zion at the time. In this time in their lives, they were exiled from their homeland and held in captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The destruction of Jerusalem occurred during the second of three deportations that took many of Judah's inhabitants into captivity in 586 B.C. Jerusalem, the capital city, was destroyed along with its royal palace and the temple. All the symbols of their political, cultural, and spiritual identity were leveled to the ground. The exiles would have remembered marching into captivity accompanying their defeated king, Zedekiah, who was bound and his eyes gouged. It was the mighty Babylonian army that did this to them. The exiles would have presumed that their condition was hopeless to say the least. How could it be anything but hopeless?

Yet, in this hopeless situation they were being challenged to imagine this messenger and his sense of determination, resolve, and perseverance, who traverses mountains to get out a very important announcement. The urgency of the messenger, together with the hope and optimism of the message, and the divine action at the center of it all can only be described as beautiful.

Have you ever thought about giving witness to the good news of your faith as something beautiful? How is it beautiful to the one receiving this news? How is it beautiful to God? How is it beautiful to the one sharing their experience?

Linking the Reign of God to the God Who Prevails

What we will continue to unpack, in this particular context, is the meaning of the words, “Your God reigns.” We want to understand how God’s reign would be made evident in their experience.

**⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy,
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.**

God’s people were being called to imagine not only the messenger, but also to imagine the voices of the sentinels. These were the sentries, the lookouts, the watchmen, who were posted on the periphery to keep watch for what was coming toward God’s people—whether it be friend or foe. In this instance, their voices were expected to convey excitement. They are shouting for joy. For *in plain sight* they see the return of the Lord to Zion. To see in their mind’s eye a future in which the Lord is returning to Zion, was to see the fortunes of their homeland turning dramatically.

It is the practice of prophets to announce events before they happen. They do this to energize God’s people. They do this to awaken God’s people from a state of complacency and move them to action. Without God’s message, the people would remain apathetic, unaware, and in despair. The prophet’s job was to get the community of faith to imagine the future. The question for us is, “What would God’s people be seeing that signaled the return of the Lord to Zion?”

**⁹ Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people;
he has redeemed Jerusalem.**

What makes God’s people break forth into singing is when they see God prevailing over the ruins of past failures and defeats. Only through the power of God could the ruins of Jerusalem be restored into being the center of life together among God’s people. This kind of transformation shows a God who prevails, and a God who prevails is a sign of a God who reigns and rules.

God’s transformation of the ruins of a people’s past failures and defeats is what we mean by the word redemption. The best transformation stories are redemption stories. Redemption not only points to the transformation of ruins, it points to a price paid for that transformation.

Some people remember “redemption centers” when people would clip “green stamps,” lick the sticky backs of the stamps, and adhere them to pages in a book. When the pages of the books were filled, you could take the books to a redemption center and use them to purchase things.

The redemption that God brings into our lives costs something. God provides something we do not deserve and cannot earn. When God transforms our lives we understand the esteem which God places on our lives, not because we are worthy of such esteem, but because the redemption of our lives brings delight to the heart of God. Redemption flows from the unconditional love of God.

In our scripture, the ruins of Jerusalem sing because there is a real expectation of future transformation. Notice though that the language being used is about something that has already happened or is already happening: “the Lord *has* comforted his people, he *has* redeemed Jerusalem.” God has already turned his heart toward his people, and the grace and mercy of God is already being offered, which offers comfort immediately in the present, and begins the transformation that will be unfolding. In all this, God shows himself as the One who prevails, and therefore rules and reigns.

Where has God prevailed in your life or someone close to you? How did this make the reign of God more real for you? How do you think God is redeeming you? What stories of transformation can you recall?

How the Nations Will Know God Reigns

If God truly reigns, then God reigns over the universe. There is therefore an expectation that what is being announced to those who call Zion their home is of interest not only to them but to all people well beyond the bounds of what was their homeland.

**¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.**

The picture of God baring his holy arm is a picture of the power that God wields, which we’re told will be seen before the eyes of all the nations. Many of the nations that had formerly been plowed into the ground by the Babylonian war machine would see their fortunes change dramatically. Unlike the other nations, God’s people would know that these changes would represent the salvation of their God, the one true God of the universe. Many nations and peoples would experience salvation, but at the center of it all was the God of Abraham, of Jacob, of Moses, and of David. The God who was worshiped from Zion would be worshiped again from that place in a rebuilt temple.

How would God do this? How do small conquered nations defeat a vast empire? They don’t. The victory would come from an unexpected corner. God would raise the king of the Persian army, Cyrus, to save the day and defeat the Babylonian army. God was to demonstrate that he was not

merely the God of the former nations of Judah and Israel. God was the Ruler of the universe. God has all nations at his disposal. The sentinels represent those who would begin to see these events from a distance. The prophets would see this beginning from afar and know the implications.

Cyrus, the Persian king, was a conqueror and empire builder, and therefore followed in the footsteps of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors before him. There were, however, very important differences that separated him from his predecessors. He instituted a vastly different policy than the Assyrians and Babylonians before him.

We actually have a record outside the Bible of the policy that Cyrus followed. The name of this record is called the Cyrus Cylinder. It was discovered almost 140 years ago in the ancient ruins of Babylon in what is now Iraq. Its home today is in the British Museum. It tells of the conquest of Babylon and the capture of the last Babylonian king in 539 B.C. by Cyrus. It tells how Cyrus was led to bring peace, to improve the lives of the Babylonians, and to send home all the people who had been displaced by the Babylonian army. It tells of his policy to let people worship the god of their choice and not the god of the conqueror. It tells of his efforts to restore temples all across Mesopotamia and letting people go back to their way of life in their home lands.

This policy was unheard of at the time. Some have called this clay “document” the first charter of human rights. The Jews are not mentioned specifically, but the record found in the Bible reflects this policy of Cyrus. According to the Book of Isaiah, Cyrus, though not a Jew, was nevertheless being used as God’s instrument. God was influencing the affairs of the nations in favor of God’s people. The salvation God was bringing would touch many nations, but God’s people Israel would know the special role they were being called to play as God’s messengers and ambassadors.

God’s people were soon to have the awesome opportunity to be a witness before the nations, because they would know the identity of the God who was making this happen. In this sense, God’s people collectively had the opportunity to serve as sentinels announcing the return of God to Zion. The feet of all God’s people could become beautiful as they rush to spread the good news that our God reigns. They could help others see the salvation God was offering.

In what good news do you believe? How has it been good news to you personally? How is it good news for all people? How might you use that knowledge to build a bridge between yourself and others with whom you might share your faith and share your hope?

Returning Home Under the Reign of God

As God’s people contemplated returning home, they could also reflect on the lessons learned in exile. God’s people had been slowly transformed while in captivity. According to the prophets, the exile and captivity of God’s people represented God’s judgment for their past idolatry and unfaithfulness. The hardships they endured had the effect of chastening and disciplining them. Using the imagery Jesus would later use, it was as if the dead branches were being pruned from them, so the branches that were bearing fruit could grow even more. In exile, God’s people

returned to God. Without the temple in their midst, their spiritual identity was allowed to form again, but this time it formed around God's word.

So, with the announcement of their return to their homeland and the rebuilding of God's house from the ruins of the former temple, they could envision a fresh start. This would take, however, a lot of intentionality.

¹¹ Depart, depart, go out from there!

**Touch no unclean thing;
go out from the midst of it; purify yourselves,
you who carry the vessels of the LORD.**

God's people were being called to holy living. If God's people were to be witnesses to the majesty, power, and goodness of God's holy reign, then they need to live in such a way that reflected God's holiness. Purifying themselves involved their commitment to their continued renewal and not falling back into their idolatrous ways. They needed to imagine returning the vessels of the Lord to be used in worship in a rebuilt temple. These vessels needed to be carried with the clean hands of a people with clean hearts.

As people who follow Christ, purifying ourselves involves dying to self and dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. We are empowered in this work through our crucified and risen Lord.

For the exiles, the thoughts of returning home across a desert had to have made them recall the exodus of their ancestors from Egypt during the time of Moses. The return of the exiles from Babylon, after all, amounted to a second exodus. According to Isaiah, there were important differences to be noted, however, between the first exodus and the second exodus.

**¹² For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight,
for the LORD will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.**

In the first Exodus, the Hebrew slaves had to go out in haste and go out in flight because the Egyptians were in hot pursuit. In the second Exodus from Babylon, the former captives were told that they would not have to go out in haste or go out in flight. Cyrus would see to it that they could return across the desert in safety. Just as the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night went before and behind God's people in the first Exodus, the Lord would go before God's people and the God of Israel would be their rearguard in the second Exodus.

Another feature of the first Exodus from Egypt was that God's people wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their faithlessness. In the second Exodus from Babylon, God was to go before and behind them in a way that should inspire them to remain faithful in their return.

Because the Holy Spirit is working in our lives to root out sin and its effects, and we are therefore continually returning to the Lord, how might the vision of God's people

returning to Zion inspire the way you look at your own journey of faith? Are there times when we make the journey back to God difficult and drawn out, and times when we let God make the journey easier? What is the difference?

Announcing the Reign of God

As we said at the beginning of our lesson, the kingdom of God is one of the grand themes of the Bible that is emphasized, repeated, and developed throughout scripture. Moreover, you can make the case that 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.

However, because the kingdom of God is such a big subject, there is something elusive about trying to describe it and even grasp it. Returning to our key verse, we are being encouraged to embrace the reality of God's kingdom:

**⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."**

Imagine again the messenger in this scripture and his sense of determination, resolve, and perseverance, who traverses mountains to get out a very important announcement. As I said before, the urgency of the messenger, together with the hope and optimism of the message, and the divine action at the center of it all could only be described as beautiful. The overall thrust of the message is that "Your God reigns!"

The God who created it all is your God, and this God reigns over all. The importance of this for our lives cannot be overstated. The good news of the righteous reign of God is something we are being invited both to receive and share with joy.

I remember when the kingdom of God came alive to me like it had never come alive before. It was an evangelism class in seminary taught by my professor, Dr. George Morris. He assigned a book for us to read written by Mortimar Arias entitled, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Message of Jesus*. Mortimer Arias was a pastor who got his start in Uruguay, became a Methodist bishop in Bolivia, then a professor of evangelism in the U.S. at Claremont School of Theology, growing into a recognized leader in world mission and evangelism.

What struck me first was the way his book reframed evangelism for me. Evangelism is not just about growing the church or people getting saved, although these are very worthy objectives. Ultimately, evangelism is no less than announcing the reign of God and calling people to participate in the reign of God. The good news is the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The book, by using the phrase “the reign of God,” also reminded me that the kingdom of God is not a static sort of destination, but the kingdom of God is the very dynamic *reign* of God. Ever since, when I read or hear or think about the kingdom of God, I think of the ongoing, active reign of God we’re being invited to recognize, experience, and join. I try to use the terms “kingdom of God” and “reign of God” interchangeably. As believers, we’re subjects of the world-wide reign and rule of God. Dwelling on something so big as the reign of God rescues me from the provincialism that all too often infects Christians. Being a believer is not just about me or my tribe or my culture.

It is a good thing that we are not going to try to define the reign of God in one lesson. Instead, we are going to spend another twelve weeks on this subject. Hopefully, by the end of this quarter, the phrase “kingdom of God,” or “reign of God” will never go in one ear and out the other.

How are you thinking about the reign of God more after contemplating this scripture passage? What are some ways you might see yourself announcing the reign of God? If the enormity of the task overwhelms you, how would you break the message you want to get across into smaller pieces—something relatable to your own experience and the needs, wants, and broken places in others who need the message that their God reigns?

Prayer

Gracious God, for centuries you have brought your people through difficult seasons and showed them that you reign. Help us pay attention to the ways you are working in us now, that we might see your overall purpose for us and others, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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