

At the end of Christmas Day, one of my children said, “I’m sad that Christmas is over.” I said, “Did you know that Christmas is a *12-day* festival?” “Really!?” “Yep. It goes until January 5!” “You mean we get eleven more days of *presents!*?” I said, “You’ll have to talk to your mom about that.”

Today is the last day of Christmas, and tomorrow (January 6) is the day that Christians around the world celebrate as Epiphany, a word that means “revelation.” You’ve probably heard someone say, “I had an epiphany!” when they had a sudden insight or *revelation*. Epiphany celebrates the revelation of the Christ to the Gentiles, often focusing on the Magi who visited Jesus in his infancy to worship him as king. They represent the nations of the world coming to see the light of Christ.

So, in honor of Epiphany (and in continuity with our Advent/Christmas) series, I thought we’d return to Isaiah to see how the revelation of Christ to the nations fits into God’s ultimate plan of redemption. We’ll see three things in this text: The Goal, The Method, and The Result.

1. The Goal: God will gather all the nations to see his glory. In verse 18, the Lord says, “**the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues.**” “Nations and tongues” (or “languages”) remind us that God does not see the world as a collection of geopolitical states. He sees “people groups”—those groups of people with their own culture, ethnic identity, language, etc. God’s purpose has never been to save Israel alone, but to gather all these nations to serve him.

When he gathers them, “**they shall come and shall see [his] glory.**” In verse 19, the Lord mentions the nations that “**have not...seen my glory.**” That statement should give us pause. Psalm 19 says that “the heavens declare the glory of God...through all the earth.” Every place on earth has seen the glory of God. Paul says in Romans 1 that God’s glory is clearly perceived in creation, but humans exchanged it for idols. So, what does God mean here by “glory”?

The answer comes in the last half of the sentence—“**I will set a sign among them.**” We have met this sign before. In chapter 7, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” In chapter 11, “In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire...” The sign is the virgin-born descendant of David who will be pierced for the transgressions of his people and raised from the dead to divide his inheritance with them. In other words, the “sign” is the Gospel.

So, the glory God refers to is his “saving glory.” It is the glory revealed in his work on behalf of sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ, crucified for his people and raised from the dead to redeem them from the curse of sin and give them eternal life.

One application from this first point is that we should make God’s goal our goal. His goal is to gather all the nations to see his glory in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As in Isaiah’s day, so in ours—there are people groups who (so far as we know) have not heard the Gospel. It should be our priority—personally and corporately—to engage in the task of missions. This includes going, sending, praying, and giving until the work is finished. This brings us to our next point.

2. The Method: God will send believers to proclaim his glory among the nations. In verse 19, the Lord says how he will gather the nations:

I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory.

God will send “survivors.” “Survivors” reminds us that Isaiah’s message was about both salvation and judgment. God’s wrath was coming upon Israel for its rebellion. They would be cut down by foreign nations and dragged into exile in foreign lands. But some would survive and come back from these nations. God would preserve a remnant of believers who would turn from their rebellion to trust in his saving promises.

God will send believers to the nations. These nations named represent the extreme ends of the known world. God will send his people to gather his people from the “ends of the earth.”

One nation is given a unique description—**“those who draw the bow.”** It was famous for its archers—which, in that day, represented a military threat. A nation famous for its archers is one known to be organized, weaponized, ready, and able to violently defend itself against foreign invaders. To enter their land and call them to leave their local deities to worship the one true God will mean that some of God's messengers are on the receiving end of those arrows. We’re reminded that just because it is God who sends us to the nations, it does not mean the task is easy or safe. Nor does it mean the nations will welcome us. Missions is not safe. But it is necessary.

God will send believers to the nations “that have not heard [his] fame or seen his glory.” This is why missions is necessary. There is no mention of the idea that God’s salvation is somehow found in their local religions and pagan practices. There is no hint that the islander staring at the sun and believing there must be gracious God will be saved apart from faith in Christ. There is no thought—as CS Lewis wrongly suggests in the Chronicles of Narnia—that God will count devotion to a different God as devotion to him. No, they are without hope unless someone comes and shows them God’s glory in the Gospel.

God will send believers, “and they shall declare [his] glory among the nations.” God’s will save the nations through the proclamation of his glory—the message of Jesus Christ, crucified for sins and raised from the dead. This is why in Acts 16, when Paul has a vision of a Macedonian man begging him to come and help them, Paul does not say, “Well, this man seems to be seeking God, so I trust God counts that as saving faith.” Instead, Luke writes, “when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, *concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*” This is why Paul writes in Romans 10:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

One reason we send people to remote, inconvenient and dangerous locations is that people are under the wrath of God for their rebellion. They cannot be saved unless they hear and believe what

God has done through Jesus Christ. They cannot hear unless someone preaches the Gospel to them. They cannot preach unless they are sent.

This is what God is doing right now between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. **He is sending his people to remotest places on earth until every last people group has heard and has some from each group believes the Gospel.**

We apply this second point by embracing the urgency of the task and joining God in his mission.

Each of us who believes the Gospel has been given this command from Jesus: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." We should ask ourselves how our lives are oriented around accomplishing it.

This point also reminds us of the importance of the Gospel. The task of missions is *proclaiming the Gospel*. The Gospel is not complicated. Paul outlines it in 1 Corinthians 15:

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

The Gospel has two parts. (1) "Christ died for our sins" (his death being evidenced by his burial). (2) "Christ was raised from the dead" (his resurrection evidenced by all those he appeared to).

What the nations need to hear more than anything else is that God sent his Son to obey God on our behalf, to satisfy God's wrath on the cross, and to conquer death by rising from the dead. Hearing this, they can turn from their sins and receive by faith the finished work of Jesus and be transferred to his kingdom through the forgiveness of sins.

3. The Result: God's glory will be displayed for all eternity.

Verses 20-21 tells us several things about the result of God's missionary effort.

"And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD."

First, we see that God's missionary effort will be successful. The horses and chariots and litters and mules and camels represent a caravan equipped and capable of bringing God's people home from any distance. "They *shall* bring all your brothers..." His purpose cannot fail.

Second, God's people will be brought to God. The impression given by Isaiah's language is one of festival worship. God's people are streaming to Mount Zion, into Jerusalem, bringing their offerings into the house of the Lord. In this case, the offering is Gentile converts. This reminds of the glorious truth we read in Hebrews 12 of what happens to us spiritually when we believe in Jesus:

...you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God...

Third, we see that God's people will serve God in unity. We see in this text the uniting of Jew and Gentile as one new nation. Notice that they are brought as "brothers from all the nations." Those from foreign nations who believe the message preached to them have become "brothers," family to the Israelite believers. The Gentiles were formerly unable to enter the temple. But now, like a "grain offering in a clean vessel," they are fit to enter God's temple, worshipping alongside the Israelites. This reminds us of what Paul says in Ephesians 3—"the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

The Gentiles were formerly cut off from the priesthood, which was given to the tribe of Levi. But God says, "**some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites.**" You could not be a "Levite" unless you were from the tribe of Levi. This language shows us that God is speaking in impressionistic terms of something bigger and better, something surpassing and replacing the Old Covenant. God is indicating that priestly service to him will be extended to all people.

We read in Genesis 2 that God placed Adam in the Garden "to serve and to keep," a pair of words only used elsewhere to describe priestly service. God told Israel in Exodus 19, "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests..." All of God's people were created to be priests unto him. This finds its fulfillment in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. We read in Revelation 5—

"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

What Good News to remember! We who were once alienated from God have been ransomed and made royal rulers and priestly servants in his kingdom.

Fourth, we see that God's people will dwell securely with God forever. Verses 22 says:

For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make
shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain.

The New Cosmos that God promises to make will remain before him forever. The "offspring" and "name" of God's people shall last just as long. "Offspring" refers to spiritual converts—to those who have been made disciples through faith in God's promised Servant. God's redemption is eternal; it will never be corrupted or come to an end.

Fifth, we see that God's people will worship God forever. God goes on:

From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD.

"New moon" and "Sabbath" refer respectively to the monthly and weekly observances through which Israelites regularly worshipped God. I don't believe this text means that we should (or will) resume the practice of observing such a calendar. Paul says in Colossians 2 that New Moons and Sabbaths no longer rule our lives because their fulfillment has arrived in Christ. As we saw in Hebrews 12, we celebrate the true festival every day we trust in Jesus. This text indicates that for all of God's people—note "all flesh," believers from every people group—will worship God forever as we live and reign with him. This is incredibly Good News! But not all will believe it.

Finally, we see that God's enemies will suffer eternal destruction. Through Isaiah, the Lord speaks one final, horrifying vision: "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

Isaiah 37 tells the remarkable story of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. Overnight, the Angel of the Lord comes and kills 185,000 soldiers, decimating the Assyrian army. You can imagine the sight as the Israelites slowly emerged from the city—a field of rotting corpses buzzing with flies and being eaten by maggots. The only solution would be to drag them to the dump and burn them. But the sight would have been one of relief—that army would never threaten them again.

Here, the Lord uses that image to depict the eternal state of those "who have rebelled against [him]." These refused to repent and believe the Good News of his Servant. He shows his people this scene to assure them that his enemies will never threaten them again.

Unquenchable fire and undying worms represent endless and excruciating destruction. This is the eternal judgment that Jesus refers to in Mark 9 as "hell...the unquenchable fire." This is what Revelation 20 says awaits all who will not obey the Gospel:

And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

One day every human will be resurrected from the dead. Those who followed Christ will be raised in glory to worship him and reign with him forever in a New Heavens and New Earth. Those who would not repent and believe shall enter eternal, conscious torment in hell. This is a place where they shall find no drop of water, no shade to cool them, no end to their torture, and the terrifying realization that it shall go on forever.

This is why missions matters. Billions are headed to an eternity of torment when they are offered an eternity of joy. The only hope to be saved from the eternal wrath of God is to be united through faith to the one who endured and satisfied that wrath on the cross. The only hope of being saved from eternal corruption is to be united in faith to the one who was raised imperishable, glorious, and eternal. The only hope any of us has is to see and rejoice in the glory of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So hear these words from Isaiah 55:

Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call to him while he is near.
Let the wicked one abandon his way
and the sinful one his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord,
so he may have compassion on him,
and to our God,
for he will freely forgive.