

## **Exposition on Isaiah 52:7-10**

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Would you turn to Isaiah 52:7-10? What I am going to do is take you through this passage in a way that I would preach it because I know this is a class which has a homiletic interest regarding how we handle Old Testament Scriptures and preach them. This is a marvelous text that has generated many Christian hymns and songs as well as Christian messages, and it, in my view, is probably the place from which we get the word "gospel." In other words, it is a text which has the word "gospel," good news, messenger of good news translated in the Septuagint, the Greek translation, with the *euangalidzo* root, which, of course, then feeds through into the New Testament into the evangel words. So, it is an influential text. Let me read it to you and then say how we will handle it. I will try and work through it in a sense, kind of preach it and preach and talk about the way I am preaching it in both ways.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the

LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God (Isa. 52:7-10, NIV).

As you know, that text has been used in various ways, both in the New Testament and in Christian hymn writing and song writing right through to modern times. What I want us to do is to see it through three horizons. First, the horizon of the immediate context in which it comes, as good news for the exiles of Judah in Babylon. Second, to look at it as good news in and through Christ, bringing it to the horizon of the New Testament and the coming of Christ as the messenger of good news and the preaching of the gospel to the nations and the Apostle Paul. How does this text resonate with New Testament teaching? Third, more briefly at the end, to the more homiletic dimension; in what sense is a text like this good news for today—on the horizon of our world? Like an airplane, if our sermon takes off from the text, from the world of the Bible, where does our text land in the modern world? That is what we will be ending upon.

**Good News for the Exiles**

First, then, good news for the exiles. I think preaching this text we would have to begin with just a little bit of background, not an enormous history lesson, but I would certainly want to remind people that this passage was spoken or addressed to, depending on what your view of Isaiah is—and I am not going there at the moment, but these words are aimed at the exiles—the people of Judah. The small kingdom of Judah had been attacked by Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem had been besieged and destroyed; the people were taken off as prisoners of war and exiled to Babylon. That had all happened about fifty years prior, and two generations had gone by. Jerusalem lay in ruins as did the hopes of Israel, and yet the people still held on to this fact that God had promised, through a number of the prophets, including this one, that the exile would not be the end—that God would do something. He would again deliver them.

The question was, “When?” Already in this section of the prophecy, as you know, God has begun to anticipate the good news. God is on His way. Get ready—from chapter 40 and so on. Here, now, in this verse, Isaiah 52:7, the prophet calls upon his listener, his readers, and upon us, the later readers of the text, to use our imagination. He invites us, as it were, to place ourselves in the ruins of Jerusalem, as it were, anxiously looking out to the east—waiting, longing for news that God is acting again, that God has woken up, that something is going to happen, and that the exiles will be coming home. In verse 7 we hear and see the running feet of a single messenger running across the mountains to the east of Jerusalem approaching the city. It is a single messenger. The Hebrew is singular. I know that a number of the translations say, “How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of *those* who bring

good news,” which is unfortunate because the Hebrew is singular. It is *a* messenger.

Have any of you seen the movie *Chariots of Fire*? You know how that movie begins? You actually hear the music and then you see the runners along the beach at St. Andrew’s in Scotland. You sort of see their feet in the water. This opening reminds me of that movie. We hear and see the feet of a running messenger at the beginning. As this messenger comes toward Jerusalem, he calls out things. You get the impression that he is almost breathless, and he has to run a few steps in between each one, but his first message is peace. Then he says, “It is good news.” Then he says, “We are saved. We have won the victory. We are saved.” Then when at last he gets to the walls of Jerusalem, he calls up to those who are there in Zion waiting, he says, “Your God reigns” (v.7)! The whole message is summarize in that expression because, of course, God is king. Yahweh reigns is the truth that explains the other three items that he has just said.

In biblical Old Testament terms, what does it mean to say that God reigns, that Yahweh is King? What does the kingdom of God bring with it? It brings all three of the things that the messenger has just said. It means *shalom*—peace, the reign of peace, the end of violence and conflict, and all the brokenness of human life and the bringing back of that harmony between God and ourselves and the world which is true biblical *shalom*.

The reign of God also means *good*. That word comes in there. He is the messenger of good. When God created the world, it was created good. Therefore, this is a proclamation of God reigning throughout the creation and over all humanity. When

that happens, it will be good because God is good.

Also, it will mean *salvation*, a very explicit Old Testament word which means the ending of slavery. This is God's rescuing, God delivering people from all that depresses them—bondage to sin, to idolatry, to exile, all the chains of evil. And we are released from that when God reigns. "Your God reigns" means that there will be peace, that life will be good, and that we shall be saved. That is the first piece of this message—the Lord **reigns!**

As you move on in the passage, you notice that there are two other Rs—because God **returns** in verse 8, and God **redeems** in verse 9. I don't know about you, but as a preacher, whenever you spot something like that—you have an R in verse 7, 8, and 9—you kind of jump on that, don't you? So, here you have God's reign in verse 7; God returns in verse 8; and God redeems in verses 9 and 10. This is a significant expansion direction of the text as it moves along.

It is not only that the message is expanding; so is the choir, if one could put it like that. The single voice of the runner, in verse 7, now becomes a mini-ensemble in verse 8 of the watchman on the walls of Jerusalem. Now, of course, this is still imaginary. This is still in the world of the imagination of the reader, and he is picturing the centuries, the watchmen, the guards who were there on the broken down and busted walls of Jerusalem, waiting, watching, and guarding the city. They now shout for joy, we read in verse 8. "Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy." Why are the watchmen shouting for joy? Well, you see it is because they can see beyond the runner. The runner is bringing the good news, but beyond and behind the runner they see the Lord himself coming back. The Lord is

returning to Zion. The God who reigns, the God who returns. God's coming home! God is coming back. That is the joy of the message.

When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem and took its people captive, the exiles weren't the only ones to leave the city. The awful reality was that God himself had departed. Do you remember the vision of Ezekiel 8-11? This is probably the lowest point of Ezekiel's prophetic ministry, maybe only second only to the death of his beloved wife—the light of his eyes, as he calls her. The lowest point of his visionary ministry was when he had that prolonged vision, over several chapters, of the glory of the Lord beginning to move and lift and detach itself from the Temple, and lift up and move off to the east—out of the Temple, out of the city over to the mountains of the east. That was awful. The big question was, "If God had gone, would He ever come back?" Already the prophet has begun to say, "Yes, God is on His way." But, now these watchmen see God returning. God is coming back to His city and to Zion as, of course, He did with the exiles and 538 BC as we know when the Babylonian Empire was destroyed, and Cyrus came to power.

Cyrus was a rather more enlightened king than Nebuchadnezzar and his successors. The Babylonians' policy was that the best way to oppress people was to capture them and get all their gods in your city because if you control the gods, you control the peoples. Cyrus seems to have had the view of, "Why should I have all the other peoples' gods in my city getting angry with me? I should basically let the peoples go back to their own lands and take their gods with them. Then they will be very grateful to me, and they can worship their gods just so long as they also keep mine, too." That was Cyrus' policy. So he let the Jews go back,

along with other nations, and even provided them with a handsome subsidy for rebuilding their Temple. So in 538 God had returned, the Temple would be rebuilt, worship was restored, the city was re-inhabited; God had returned.

God, then, who reigns and returns, is also then the God who redeems because in verse 9, the choir expands again. We move from the single messenger to the centuries but now in verse 9 it bursts into songs, “You ruins of Jerusalem.” In other words, the whole of Jerusalem—all the rubble of Jerusalem, as it were, is told to stand up and start singing praise to God just like Jesus had said on Palm Sunday, that if He stopped the children singing His praises even the very stones would cry out. The prophet here is imagining the stones erupting as they get legs and voices and jump up and shout and praise God. Why should they do so this? Because “the Lord has comforted and redeemed Jerusalem.” Beautiful language. Comfort, of course, takes us back to Isaiah 40:1, “Comfort, comfort my people”—the language of the ending of grief, pain, and sorrow and the pouring in of comfort and restoration. But redeeming, the language of the ending of bondage and exodus language—liberating language and the prophet says that is why Jerusalem should be singing. God is redeeming.

Then, in verse 10, what happens is very typical of the prophets, and you want to watch out for this because it happens a lot. The word of prophecy, spoken in a very specific context to a particular people, namely the exiles of Judah hundreds of years before Jesus, opens up to a future and to a horizon that lies way beyond, not only the exiles and the New Testament horizon, but lies beyond us still. It points to a global perspective. “The Lord will lay bare His arm in the sight of all the nations and all the ends

of the earth will see the salvation of our God.” This, of course, is an echo of Isaiah 40 where we read that all flesh will see the glory of God. So, Isaiah 52:10 is a verse which points us, as it were, from having our eyes down in Old Testament history of the end of the exile and lifts up our eyes to be reminded again of the global purpose of God—of God’s saving purpose for the world, for all nations, for the ends of the earth. This is missional language, if you don’t mind me bringing that back in again. Here is the mission of God expressed and promised to Abraham, articulated in Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy and the Psalms and the Proverbs. All the nations, all the ends of the earth are going to participate in some way—are going to benefit in some way by what God is going to accomplish through this event.

But how is it going to happen? That is where you get this expression, “the arm of the Lord” (v. 10). “The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, all the ends of the earth.” Now, at one level, that is fairly straightforward. The baring of the arm is fairly easy to understand metaphor and is used elsewhere in the Old Testament. It is very similar to our expression, “Rolling up your sleeves.” If you have real work to do, you get your sleeves up, get your jacket off, and get stuck into the job. It would also be a military picture of a soldier throwing off his cloak to make sure his arm was free and ready with his sword. So, there is battle imagery here in the “arm of the Lord.”

Yes, but there is other resonance of this word or phrase already expressed in the very close context of this passage. So, for example, the arm of the Lord has already been described in chapter 40:10-11, as the tender caring arm of God by which He lifts up and provides for the flock—the lambs.

He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in His arm and carries them close to his heart. The arm of the Lord is powerful, but also tender.

The arm of the Lord has been referred to previously in these passages as the arm that will operate for God in His salvation and in Isaiah 53:1, the arm of the Lord becomes personified. “Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” It immediately goes on to describe the arm of the Lord as the one whom we know—as the suffering servant, the one who would suffer and die for the vindication of God and the ultimate salvation of His people. So what we have here is that the good news which is to go to the ends of the earth is the good news that will bring joy to all the nations. It is a God who reigns—God is King so it will be good, peace. He is a God who returns to His people, as He had promised, out of His faithfulness—a God who redeems not only His people but the whole world through his mighty arm outstretched in suffering loving and gentle compassion and ultimate victory. Those are the kinds of things I would want to say about this passage in its own horizon. It is a horizon that anticipates—even within the text itself.

### **Good News In and Through Christ**

One of the songs which I think is based on a text like this is a very old Christmas carol—Go Tell it on the Mountain that Jesus Christ is born. That language of “go tell it on the mountain” probably echoes Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 52. It is part of the Christian narrative tradition and the Christmas tradition that our text here in Isaiah 52 actually finds its horizon of fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ and in His life and ministry. I would want to say that that is a right and valid biblical theological interpretation. When you explore the text in its different dimensions,

as I have tried to do, the text talks about the God who reigns, the God who returns, the God who redeems; then immediately when you come to Jesus, all three parts of that good news which the messenger brought to the exiles—the messenger of the good news of the gospel, the word in the text in Isaiah, are true and are good news in Jesus.

Think about it. Jesus was and is *God reigning*. That is precisely the message He came with. He came into Galilee preaching, “The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel,” said Jesus in all the teaching about the reign of God in the gospels. Jesus wasn’t coining a new idea. The Jews, to whom He was speaking, knew exactly what was meant by the Kingdom of God. Their Scriptures taught about it; their songs sang about it. Jesus is saying, “Guys, what you thought of as something future, I am telling you is here now because I am here. If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God is among you.” But it is among you like a seed growing secretly, like yeast bubbling away in the dough. It is at work in the world, but it is at work in the world in the lives of people who are members of God’s kingdom—people who have entered God’s reign, people in whose lives God is reigning (which is the dynamic concept of the Kingdom of God—not a place or state of affairs); it is a reality in the lives of people who are committed to the justice and the reign of God who, as Jesus said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice...” In such people God, Jesus is God reigning through them.

Then, of course, Jesus was and is *God returning*. That is the emphasis you find in the Gospels—this theme of fulfillment, that what God had promised—namely that He would come—now actually happened in Jesus. A number of Old Testament

prophecies had said that. For example, Isaiah 35 has these precise words, “Your God will come” and then describes what will happen when your God comes—the blind will see, the lame will walk, the deaf will hear, and so on because God will come bringing salvation. Remember when the disciples of John the Baptist went to Jesus and asked, “Are you actually the Messiah or not? Shall we look for somebody else?” Jesus said, “Look around you. What is happening? What do you see?” Then Jesus quotes Isaiah 35—the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the poor have the good news preached to them. The implication was that if that text was what was supposed to happen when your God had come, who is here? Who has come?

Similarly, in Malachi 3 it speaks of how God would send Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord and the God whom you seek will come to His Temple. So, Malachi speaks about God’s coming preceded by Elijah. Again, Jesus says to His disciples, “I tell you. John the Baptist is that Elijah. Blessed is the one who doesn’t take offense.” Now, why would they have been offended by identifying Elijah with John the Baptist? That isn’t what was offensive. What was offensive was everybody knew that according to the Old Testament schedule, Elijah must come and then God comes, through the Messiah. So, if everybody knew that John the Baptist had already come and then Jesus comes, and John the Baptist is Elijah, then who on earth could Jesus be? So, the implication, you see, is this is God himself coming.

Of course, the supreme moment when Jesus demonstrates that is on Palm Sunday—the Sunday before His crucifixion when He decides to ride on a donkey into Jerusalem. He didn’t need to. He had walked all the way from Galilee, so he didn’t need the

donkey to get the last few hundred yards! It was a very explicit enacting of the prophecy of Zachariah 9—“Behold your king comes, humble and riding on a donkey.” So, those who had eyes to see and knew their Scriptures knew that this is what Jesus was doing. He was coming as the Lord, in the name of the Lord—“Hosanna is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” The Lord was returning to His Temple, to Jerusalem, to His people. Jesus was that person and, of course, remains so. He was and is God coming back.

Third, Jesus was and is *God redeeming* because, of course, Jesus, as the one prophesied in Isaiah in all those passages, ultimately went to Calvary. The arm of the Lord was stretched out. It was stretched out quite literally on the cross for the salvation of the world. It is almost like Christmas; God was rolling up His sleeves for Calvary. ***Here you have God, in Jesus, acting to bring about redemption and salvation. He reigns, He returns, and He redeems—all three of those things are part of the truth of the gospel as we have it in Christ.*** Here is God, in Jesus, the God who reigns; the God who returns; the God who promised to redeem. In that sense, then, Jesus, in relation to our text, is the fulfillment. Jesus is the reigning, returning, redeeming God—the messenger of the good news and the content of the good news in the text.

### **So What Does This Mean to Me Today?**

We have to finish off, as you do with any good sermon, by asking, “But so what?” What does it mean? We need to bring a text not only to the immediate horizon of its own context and understand it in relation to the exiles and dig into it and wrestle with it exegetically; and we not only need to bring it into the light of the new Testament gospel of Jesus and relate it to Him in some way;

we also need to ask, “What does it mean today?”

When I first preached on this text, I walked around the streets of London asking myself that question. I often take texts for a walk, and take the text with you and think about it as you walk and observe. As I was walking, I was asking the question, “What does it mean for me as a twenty-first-century Christian believer that Jesus is the reigning Lord, the retuning King, and the redeeming Savior?” I had to put some flesh and bones onto that. I came up with the following thoughts. I will try to summarize them very briefly.

For me to say that Jesus Christ is God reigning means that when I look out in our world with all of its unpredictable complexity and its immorality and the world of competing counter planes, and the posturing of military power, terrorism, cultural economic dominism, economic collapse, and everything else, I have to ask myself the question as a believer, “Where do I see the reign of God in Christ in this world? Where do I detect, where do I discern the signs of God’s Kingdom, God reigning?” You might say, “Surely that is difficult. That is too complex. How can you do that in our topsy-turvy world?” Well, it is surely no more difficult today than it would have been in sixth-century BC when Assyria and Babylon ruled the world, and this prophet was able to say, “Your God reigns through the ruins of Jerusalem.” It is no more difficult for us today than it would have been for Jesus and His disciples in the Roman Empire, where you had in that era a single great world super power that dominated the whole known world with its mixture of military superiority and economic self-interest. Here you have a great world power; Caesar is lord. Yet, these disciples went out into that world and said,

“Our God reigns! Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.” Laughable! Ridiculous sort of a thing to say, but they did it! I have to be able to say the same in our world today, to say that our world is ultimately under the governance of the Lamb on the throne—the Lamb who was slain and was seated on the throne of God, as Revelation says. That takes faith! You don’t discern that with the eyes in your head.

The third thing for me to say that Jesus is God returning means that I must exercise great hope and great faith because when we look at the waste places of the world, using the language of our text, “the ruins of Jerusalem, ” the waste places of our world, don’t we get depressed? When we look at the ruins of the things that God created to be beautiful, whether we think of the appalling waste and destruction of our planet and its diversity, beauty, and resources, or whether we think of the waste of human suffering, brutality, and cruelty and the wasting of human life and potential with women and children as slaves all over the world or whether we think of the sheer mountain of human suffering caused by things that we don’t understand, like earthquakes and tsunamis, and so on—then I have to remember that Jesus is the returning King! God is coming back and to be able to sing the ending of Psalm 96, which is very similar to this passage, by the way, and it also includes the word gospel. When God returns, the whole of creation will rejoice. So, Psalm 96 pictures the whole of creation—the earth, the fields, the trees, the forests, singing for joy before the Lord for He comes! He is coming back, and He is coming to put things right—which is what it means to judge the world—so that the rivers clap their hands and the mountains sing for joy. “Let them sing before the Lord for He comes to judge the earth and He will judge the world in righteousness and His people

with equity” (Ps. 96: 13). God is coming to sort it, to fix it, to put it right, to do justice.

At this point, if I was preaching this, I sometimes use an illustration. I have four children; they are all grown up now. They told us quite recently actually—when they thought it was safe to—that when they were little children they used to sometimes go into the lounge (sort of the posh room in the house where we lived when I was a pastor) and do all the things they weren’t allowed to do. So, they used to jump up and down on the sofa and throw the cushions around and run around the room until one of them would shout out, “Mummy’s coming!” Then they would all sit down and be good and be quiet because mummy’s coming. There would either be joy or judgment, depending on where you were or whether the last one to sit down was out, or something like that. They said, “This was our game. We used to actually say, ‘Let’s go play Mummy’s coming!’” I thought to myself, that is only a child’s game, and yet it has an eschatological dimension, you know. We can play around here, but Mummy’s coming, and when Mummy’s coming things will change. So, what difference should it make to us as Christian believers that we live in this awful world? We live in it with the hope and the faith that God is coming. God is coming back. We wait for and long for that. We look forward to the restoration and the recreation of God’s earth—the whole of the new creation as it is to come. We live with a sense of God returning, of God coming back.

Finally, for me to believe that Jesus is the redeeming God is a great hope when I look out at the numbers of the human race who live in bondage, oppression, and slavery of all sorts. I hope you know that there are now more people in our world who are slaves than there ever were at the time of the slave

trade of Wilberforce. People are trafficked as slaves. It brings hope in a world where people are in bondage to poverty, hunger, injustice, rape, violence, murder, addiction, AIDS and HIV, and even the bondage of spiritual darkness and ignorance of the gospel. When I think about all that bondage, then I look forward to the day when all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God, when those who long for His appearing will see Him as He really is. This will be a redemptive moment—when God will redeem the world. The Lord and King and Savior of the world will have come.

Well, of course, that is the ending of the Bible story. That is where it all leads to—the new creation, the redemption, no more curse, no more sin, no more bondage, no more tears, no more suffering—the language of Revelation 21. You might say to anyone who preaches like this, “Well, how can that be?” I have to say, “I don’t know!” But the fact that I don’t know how God will do it doesn’t mean that I don’t believe He will. I cannot tell how these things will happen, but I believe them and look forward to them. That is why one of my favorite hymns is by W. I. Fullerton, which I commend to you if you don’t know it. It has that phrase at the beginning of each verse, “I cannot tell...” It is sung to the most beautiful tune in the world, The Londonderry Air, a lovely Irish tune. Each verse says, “I cannot tell why ... but this I know” and then it affirms a gospel truth. Here are the last couple of verses:

I cannot tell how He [Christ] will win  
the nation, how He will claim His  
earthly heritage, how to satisfy the  
aspirations of east and west, of sinner  
and of sage, but this I know, all flesh  
shall see His glory and He shall reap the  
harvest He has sown and some glad day  
His Son will shine in splendor when He  
the Savior of the world is known. [And

the last verse ends]: And this I know, the skies will sound His praises ten thousand thousand human voices sing in earth to heaven, and heaven to earth will answer, ‘At last, the Savior, the Savior of the world is King.’”

It is a wonderful hymn. I commend it to you; you might want to look it up.

So, that is what it means to me. But then as I walked the streets of London with this verse and this passage in my mind and wondering how I was going to preach it, I had to say to myself, “But what does it mean to them?” You walk in public or anywhere in any country of the world, and you have to ask that! I thought it as I walked along the streets of London. What about these people in the streets of London? What does it mean to them that Jesus of Nazareth is the reigning Lord of history—that Jesus is the returning King of creation, and that Jesus is the Redeemer and Savior of the whole world? The answer seemed to sort of bounce back off the walls—nothing! Nothing at all to these people walking past me! How can it mean anything to them if they have never heard it, if they don’t know this story, if they are ignorant of these realities? How can they have heard it if no one has ever told them? And as soon as you begin to think that way, the text that we are looking at, Isaiah 52:7, bounces back again—except through the words of the Apostle Paul. He said exactly that and quoted precisely this text in Romans 10. He says,

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile; the same Lord is Lord of them all and richly blesses all who call on Him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believe in? And how can they

believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news” (Rom. 10:12-15).

Paul there changes the singular to the plural, and I think he does it deliberately. The one who has brought the good news is Jesus Christ, but now that message is to be taken by the feet of the many who bring that good news to those who have not yet heard. I guess there is nothing beautiful about feet at all, when you think of it. The only thing that makes feet beautiful is when they are wearing the running shoes of the gospel, which is how Paul describes the gospel of peace in Ephesians 6 as part of the armor of the Lord—the shoes that are shod on our feet for the sake of the gospel. That is the challenge of this text. We are those who are to go out and tell it on the mountain—the mountain of human pride that Jesus Christ is King and not Caesar. To tell it on the mountain of human despair that Jesus Christ is born and is returning—He will come back. And on the mountain of human bondage and suffering and slavery, that Jesus Christ is born and is Redeemer and Savior and Lord and we turn to Him.

So, I think it is a passage that has wonderful good news for the exiles, wonderful good news on the streets of Galilee when it was preached by Jesus, and still wonderful good news to be preached today on the horizon of our world. That is the kind of horizons and resonance and echoes of a text like this that I think we can preach through from its own roots in its own context, into the world of today provided we take it through the realities and centrality of Jesus and the gospel.