

God Reigns

Devotional Reading: Colossians 3:8–17
Background Scripture: Isaiah 52:1–12

Isaiah 52:7–12

7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!

8 Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion.

9 Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem.

10 The LORD hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

11 Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD.

12 For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the LORD will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rereward.

Key Text

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!—Isaiah 52:7

The Righteous Reign of God

Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the “good tidings.”
2. Explain the reason for those good tidings.
3. Describe ways to proclaim good tidings today.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Power of Announcements
- B. Lesson Context
- I. **A Call to Rejoice (Isaiah 52:7–10)**
 - A. Chorus of Singers (vv. 7–9)
On Giving and Receiving Good News
 - B. Reason for Singing (v. 10)
- II. **A Call for a New Exodus (Isaiah 52:11–12)**
 - A. Leaving Babylon (v. 11)
Are You Done?
 - B. Trusting God (v. 12)

Conclusion

- A. Isaiah 52 Back Then
- B. Isaiah 52 for Today
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

anthropomorphism *anthropomorphism* - *truh-puh-more-fizz-um*.

Babylonian *Bab-ih-low-nee-un*.

Cyrus *Sigh-russ*.

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un*.

Nehemiah *Nee-huh-my-uh*.

Phoenician *Fuh-nish-un*.

Introduction

A. The Power of Announcements

One of the more impactful inventions of the late 1800s, though not one we notice often, was the color poster. This was due to improvements in photography, papermaking, and printing. As a result, businesspeople, artists, preachers, and government leaders could suddenly advertise ideas and experiences to the general public in artistically interesting ways.

Today, many of those early posters are collectors' items, commanding six-figure prices at auction. But originally they simply made announcements in inviting ways: "Your country needs you" ... "Buy our medicine" ... "Come to the circus" ... The message drew viewers into the world of the creators, passing along not just information but values, feelings, and obligations.

The ancient audience of the book of Isaiah never saw a poster, of course. But they did experience the power of announcements to motivate, precisely because the announcement contained more than information. The people were being invited to experience a new world, to feel differently about themselves, and to reclaim the values they thought they had lost. The good news being announced would radically change their lives and the lives of their descendants.

B. Lesson Context

In the ancient world, heralds traveled from the capital to smaller cities, reporting the decrees of the king or news of war and peace (example: Habakkuk 2:2). Isaiah 40 begins a large section (of which chapter 52, today's lesson, is part) with the image of a herald announcing good news. And in some sense the entirety of chapters 40–55 could be seen as one single announcement by just such a person. For the ancient hearers of the contents of this text, the auditory was more important than the visual, particularly if they were unable to read. But the power of the announcement was present either way. So we might think of these verses as a sort of audio poster, an announcement depicting a new world in which the audience could imagine themselves taking part.

Isaiah 52 falls into five sections: verses 1–2, 3–6, 7–10, 11–12, and 13–15. Each of the first four sections invites exiled Israelites to return home because Babylon is about to fall to the Persians under Cyrus the Great (see Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13). The poems in these four sections personify Zion as a woman, and depict the period of exile as one of slumber for the ancient city. A rebuilt Jerusalem would welcome home her returning children. The holy and ethical acts to which the prophets had always called the people could be embraced anew as Jerusalem was given another chance to live up to her calling and potential.

I. A Call to Rejoice

(Isaiah 52:7–10)

A. Chorus of Singers (vv. 7–9)

7a. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation.

Paul quoted this verse in Romans 10:15 as part of his discussion about the relationship between preaching and faith. The good news affects the one announcing it as well as the hearers. The prophet's *feet* become *beautiful* inasmuch as the message is beautiful. In the book of Isaiah, however, the verse has a more specific reference: it describes the one announcing the good news of the return from Babylonian exile to the homeland of Israel and especially to Jerusalem.

The first part of the verse takes the reader back to chapter 40, the beginning of the book's celebration of the return from exile. The verse before us extols the proclaimer—here the same people invited to announce God's comfort to Jerusalem in Isaiah 40:1–3. They do so *upon the mountains* as in Isaiah 40:9, not only so they can be heard across the valleys, but also because the Israelite homeland was mountainous in contrast to the flat plains of Babylonia.

The message of *good tidings* has important content, namely *peace* and *salvation* (rescue). Israelites will experience the end of their suffering at the hands of the Babylonians in a way

somewhat similar to the exodus from Egypt, which happened hundreds of years earlier. The deliverance to come would (or should) lead to good, ethical behavior. Properly practiced, that behavior will result, in turn, in social harmony and fairness. But that would happen only if the people were to commit themselves to the message. For similar thoughts, see Nahum 1:15.

Visual for Lesson 1. *Allow one minute for silent reflection on (and possible rededication to) learners' commitment to spreading the good news.*

What Do You Think?

How do you celebrate within your congregation both the good news *and* those who proclaim it?

Digging Deeper

What are some practical ways to bless and encourage spiritual leaders who spread the good news?

On Giving and Receiving Good News

One summer a family friend found herself in the midst of a tragic close call while boating: her family's boat capsized in the path of a very large wake. She was frantic as she popped up from the water, searching for the members of her family. One was missing—her daughter. Her husband swam underneath the capsized boat three times, but always came up without her. As my friend yelled for help, one man dove in and came up with the little girl. She was alive! I can only imagine the relief they all must have felt.

There is much celebration when sharing a message of hope, joy, and thanksgiving. That is true not only for the one receiving the message but also for the one bringing it. The man who saved my friend's little girl was overcome with such emotions.

Our lives could be so much more joyful were we to pray for opportunities to share the gospel—the gospel that rescues people from eternal death. Do you pray for such opportunities?

—P. M.

7b. That saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!

The last line of this verse summarizes the announcement as the coming of God's reign. As Psalms 93; 97; and 99 indicate, variations of the phrase *thy God reigneth* are found in the worship in the temple. In that worship expression, God's rule over the cosmos was celebrated and affirmed. People who believe that God reigns live in hope of the time when all the evils of the world will disappear and goodness will triumph.

Zion is another designation for the city of Jerusalem. This fact is seen in many passages where Hebrew poetry repeats thoughts by using related or synonymous words, a feature known as parallelism (examples: Isaiah 31:9; 64:10).

What Do You Think?

What practical results do you see when you fully trust that God reigns?

Digging Deeper

How do you cling to this same truth when it doesn't appear—in the moment—that God is reigning?

8a. Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing.

The prophet imagines the city of Jerusalem after it is rebuilt and its staff of night *watchmen* put to work. The guards will not need to warn of approaching armies or other dangers, however. Instead, they will shout loudly about the salvation of the people and their ongoing return to the city.

Certain biblical texts refer to the prophets as watchmen (Jeremiah 6:17; Ezekiel 3:17; 33:7). Since the previous verse in our text speaks of the beautiful feet of the messengers, the verse at hand may have prophets-as-watchmen in mind. In that case, a prospective change in the prophets' message would be in view. Instead of earlier prophets' messages of warning—criticisms that fell mostly on deaf ears—the prophets would lead with news of celebrations in the new era of redemption. We note in passing that false prophets can be seen as false watchmen (Isaiah 56:10).

8b. For they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion.

Eye to eye is a literal translation of the underlying Hebrew. But the expression does not have the same meaning in Hebrew that it normally does in English. For clarity, we can turn to Numbers 14:14, where the same Hebrew expression is translated “face to face,” indicating clear and unhindered communication—visual as well as auditory. Everyone involved will see the miraculous deeds of God! The people of God will witness His work with all their senses.

When the Lord shall bring again Zion is also confusing at first glance. Clarity is found in other passages where the underlying Hebrew word for “bring again” is translated. One such is Jeremiah 44:14, where the same word is translated (twice) as “return.” Whereas God had formerly abandoned Zion (see Ezekiel 10), things were to change when God returned and resumed full communion with the people.

9a. Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem.

When the works of the Lord are recognized as such, there should be an appropriate response. Regarding the *waste places of Jerusalem*, Isaiah 35:1–2 is similar. The singing was to be done not just by the people, but by desolated Jerusalem itself. The prophet Isaiah mentions these waste places also in Isaiah 51:3 and 61:4, along with the parallel terms “wilderness,” “desert,” “desolations” (twice), and “waste cities.” The rebuilding and repopulation of Jerusalem would turn the city into a place of celebration as the memory of God's saving work would come to the people's minds. Their songs—reversals of laments like Psalm 137—would echo off the stone walls that the people were to rebuild. About 140 years would elapse between the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the rebuilding of the city's walls in about 445 BC. When that event came to pass, the people did indeed celebrate with singing in a grandiose ceremony (Nehemiah 12:27–43).

What Do You Think?

In addition to singing, what are some ways you express joy in your salvation?

Digging Deeper

What “waste places” in your life (or others' lives) can benefit from a renewed proclamation of joy?

9b. For the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem.

The comfort promised in Isaiah 40:1 is the rebuilding of the city. It was set in motion when Sheshbazzar led the first wave of returnees from Babylon back to Jerusalem in 538 BC, according to a decree by Cyrus, king of Persia (Isaiah 45:13; Ezra 1:1–11). They began a start-and-stop process of rebuilding that lasted through the time of Nehemiah, almost a century later.

B. Reason for Singing (v. 10)

10. The LORD hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

The image of God's making *bare his holy arm* is an anthropomorphism—a description of something not human (in this case, someone) in terms of human characteristics. Since God is Spirit (John 4:24), He doesn't have a literal, physical arm. But the figure of speech is marvelously useful in communicating information about God's authority (the right to do something) and power (the ability to do something). His arm, along with mention of His "hand," occurs in several Old Testament texts that describe God's warfare against evil (examples: Exodus 15:16; Deuteronomy 4:34; Ezekiel 20:33–34). It also can indicate God's actions in pastoral care and protection (Isaiah 40:11; compare John 10:29).

Given the modifier of the word *holy* and the wider context, the warfare aspect is in view, here considered necessary to pastoral care. The verse at hand does not explicitly name God's foe to be defeated, though surely the Babylonian Empire is meant (see Isaiah 48:20). That empire met its end in 539 BC at the hands of Cyrus, the Lord's chosen vessel (see Lesson Context). Working His will through human vessels seems to be God's preferred method. But if He can find no such vessel that is suitable, He will do it himself (59:16; Ezekiel 22:30–31).

The phrases *in the eyes of all the nations* and *all the ends of the earth shall see* might cause us to wonder how widespread the knowledge of Israel's experience of deliverance could have been in the sixth century BC. Jewish enclaves existed in various parts of the Babylonian Empire and in Egypt, and they could have spread news. Since Phoenician colonies existed around the Mediterranean, stories had a way of making the rounds via their trading routes (compare 1 Kings 10:6–7).

Even so, the fulfillment of this promise was generations into the future. As in the previous verse, the prophet was less concerned with a time line than he was regarding the final outcome and the people's response to it. Further, the imagery may also be intended as a type (depiction) of the deliverance we have in Christ, since we are to take the gospel of deliverance from sin to "all nations" (Matthew 28:19–20).

What Do You Think?

What circumstances prevent you from expressing concern for the salvation of the whole world?

Digging Deeper

What help do you need from God to overcome these circumstances and proclaim His salvation?

II. A Call for a New Exodus

(Isaiah 52:11–12)

A. Leaving Babylon (v. 11)

11a. Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence.

The apostle Paul quotes this verse in 2 Corinthians 6:17, along with other Old Testament texts that call the people of God to cling to Him only. The command to *depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from* Babylon reminds the reader of the exodus from Egypt. That event, separated by some 900 years from the forthcoming departure, featured movement away from a place of suffering, thanks to God's merciful plans for His people.

11b. Touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD.

The book of Leviticus, particularly chapters 11 and 13–15, specifies numerous *unclean* things that the Israelites were to avoid. Contact with such things rendered a person temporarily unable to participate in temple worship (2 Chronicles 23:19). Since the people would carry the temple *vessels* back to Jerusalem (Ezra 5:13–14; 7:19; 8:25–30), they needed to avoid anything other than absolute respect for those objects and the uses to which they would be put. The kings of Babylon had used these items for unholy purposes (1:7; Daniel 1:2; 5:1–4, 23), and that practice dare not be repeated. Paul's own reference to uncleanness points mainly to anything connected to idolatry, as does the wider context of today's passage in Isaiah (see commentary on Isaiah 52:11a, above).

The temple objects were to connect the Jews' future worship to what had gone before. The connection between verse 1 and verse 11 forms a complete idea: the people, the objects, and the entire city will become fit for the proper worship of God in a rebuilt temple.

What Do You Think?

What practices help you pursue purity from sin?

Digging Deeper

How will you strike a balance between remaining spiritually pure and actively witnessing to a sinful world (James 1:27)?

Are You Done?

When my children were young, to say they didn't mind getting dirty would be an understatement! They seemed to find all the mud puddles every time they played outside. When they came home covered in dirt, I would ask them one question: "Are you done?" The reason was simple: I didn't want to go through all the work of cleaning them up more than once.

When the Israelites received the good news of their pending return to their homeland, two departures were actually in view. One was physical, and the other was spiritual: their physical

departure from Babylon was to be accompanied by the more important departure from sin (compare Isaiah 59:20).

God has paid a high price to cleanse us spiritually so that we might return to Him for all eternity. That price was the life of His Son. It's a price He won't pay twice, and it's a price that we dare not disdain (see Hebrews 6:4–6). We value that price properly when we decide that we are done with sin (see Romans 6:6–7; 1 Peter 4:1–3).

Can you say firmly and decisively today that you are done with sin?

—P. M.

B. Trusting God (v. 12)

12. For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the LORD will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rereward.

The second exodus here promised contains both a departure from the past first exodus and a continuity with it. Before, the Israelites ate their food in *haste* because they needed to leave Egypt quickly (see Exodus 12:11). However, whereas the first exodus happened under the continued threat of a cruel ruler, the second exodus was to need no such vigilance, because the Babylonian Empire had collapsed. No hasty flight would be necessary. Careful planning could occur, and the departure would take place when all was ready.

Both cases, however, witness to God's protection. The phrase *the Lord will go before you* is reflected in Exodus 13:21; the idea of a supernatural *rereward* (rearguard) is seen in Exodus 14:19. Although the second exodus predicted by Isaiah would not be endangered by a pursuing army as the first one was, the returnees would still need divine protection (Ezra 8:21–23).

God's ultimate future for those devoted to Him was to come about because of the work of the suffering servant, described in the three verses immediately after the verse before us (Isaiah 52:13–15). Relief for God's suffering people of the sixth century BC foreshadowed the ultimate and eternal relief from suffering by that servant—Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

A. Isaiah 52 Back Then

The prophetic poetry of Isaiah 40–55 has come a long way by the time we get to Isaiah 52. The section began with a distraught, heartbroken people living in a foreign land, subject to the whims of foreign rulers. They had given up hope in God's care for them since their ancestors' sins had brought an ongoing catastrophe upon them. But at the point of today's Scripture, they stood on the verge of a new and bright future. For the ancient audience of Isaiah 52, the call to return home involved a literal, physical movement from Babylonia to the land of Israel, more than 1,000 miles away. Yet the more important movement was not that of a four-month journey across the land, but that of an interior journey of faith, in mind and spirit.

The greatest enemy of faith is often traced to a loss of hope. This week's text called on the people of Israel to reclaim their hope so that they could act in faith toward the God who sought their trust, their obedience, and their love. The temptation to despair undoubtedly remained strong, and that is not something one can simply will away. But by refreshing memories of God's saving actions of the past, Isaiah's prophetic vision of the future could be believed and acted on. A renewed realization of God's presence is always in order!

But several things had to happen for that realization to take root. These included (1) affirming the value of the messengers; (2) trusting those messengers to do their jobs in speaking truth; (3) accepting the opportunity to transform ruins, both physical and spiritual, into places of rejoicing; and (4) reintroducing of worship as God desires. All these foundational elements became reality as God set forth His plan of rescue. As such, the text takes a full-orbed view of the return (the new exodus), considering the actions and attitudes of all parties involved. Such a wide lens repeats the picture that appears in Isaiah 40, the opening of the “comfort section” of the book.

B. Isaiah 52 for Today

There can be no greater calling than that of bearing God’s words of hope to people who are seemingly without hope. That is true whether we are talking about the sixth century BC or the twenty-first century AD. And just as the announcement of rescue to the ancient Israelites was to result in rejoicing, so also for us. The good news of God’s saving work should always create a climate of gratitude, joy, desire to share the news, and generous acceptance of all who receive it.

Because God was in the picture, all was not lost for the Jews in Babylonian exile. The same is true today for those exiled spiritually in sin, enemies of God. Today’s gospel messengers—all Christians—are to join God’s work in spreading that message of eternal rescue (Matthew 28:19–20). The courage and faith required of the ancient Israelite is our must-have as well. Let us celebrate the good ways in which God can use us as His vessels to transform the lives of those around us.

C. Prayer

O God, who calls us to faith, empower us to leave the comfortable and familiar for places You would have the message of Your Son spread. We pray in the name of that Son. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Don’t just celebrate the good news of the gospel—be its messenger!