
THE ADVENT BRINGS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND DELIVERANCE

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He [John the Baptist] came into the region around the Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for remission of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled. Every mountain and hill will be brought low. The crooked will become straight, And the rough ways smooth. All flesh will see God's salvation.'"

Luke 3:3-6 (WEB)

How many times have you heard or read these Advent verses? And how many times have you coupled John's prophetic message exclusively with his "baptism of repentance for remission of sins"? But if you carefully consider the remainder of his message, you'll find something beyond forgiveness--the long-term "salvation" provided by God through the gift of His Son. So this time why not take a fresh look at another possible interpretation of what John taught, using the words of Isaiah, the prophecy (Magnificat) uttered by His mother Mary, and the words of Jesus Himself?

John used the words of Isaiah to announce the coming of a Savior, so perhaps we could profit from what Isaiah said of this Savior: "But with righteousness he will judge the poor, And decide with equity for the humble of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; And with the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked. Righteousness will be the belt of his waist, And faithfulness the belt of his waist" (Isa. 11:4-5). John went on to proclaim the same message when he said that Christ's mission would include the straightening of crooked paths, the filling of every valley, the bringing down of every mountain and hill, the smoothing of rough places, and the viewing by all flesh of the powerful salvation brought by God to the earth.

Of what were Isaiah and John speaking? Were their words merely metaphors for the forgiveness of sin, or were they prophecies concerning justice and deliverance to be accomplished through Christ? Were they merely glittering generalities or meaningless platitudes, or did they portend a future leveling and equalizing of oppressive social, political, economic, and religious systems that had burdened and afflicted humankind for thousands of years?

Other prophecies reveal that Isaiah and John were both speaking of a physical deliverance for the earth and its peoples to be accomplished through Christ. Mary, mother of Jesus, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said of her Son: "He has put down princes from their thrones. And has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things. He has sent the

rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). Of what could Mary have been speaking except what both Isaiah and John saw arising through the Christ?

And Jesus in His first sermon in the temple at Nazareth made clear His mission and destiny when He said: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, Because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim release to the captives, Recovering of sight to the blind, To deliver those who are crushed, And to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

So John meant more than just spiritual renewal when he spoke of Jesus straightening paths, filling valleys, bringing mountains low, and making rough places smooth. He meant that Jesus would not only bring spiritual revival and renewal to the earth, but a massive shaking, leveling, and restructuring of the earth's ruling power structures. The metaphor arises from the practice of early kings to ease their journeys by sending emissaries before them to straighten and improve dirt roads, remove obstacles, and level the most troublesome hills. John used this example to illustrate something much more prominent--the leveling of inequities and injustices resulting from thousands of years of ignorance of and refusal to obey God's word. It wasn't just that physical mountains would be leveled and valleys filled. Nor was it that crooked roads would be straightened. John used the term mountains, as Scripture sometimes does, to describe pervasive world systems entrenched in the highest positions of power and influence.

Obviously, the first Advent did not produce justice and righteousness for the earth--that task remains for the second Advent when Christ returns to earth to set up His kingdom. This promised reign of justice for the poor and oppressed is not merely wishful thinking or something to be accomplished only in heaven. No, it refers to something that will occur here on this earth when Christ returns to set up His kingdom.

When you hear the Advent story, think beyond the Baby Jesus to the King coming in all His glory to reclaim His kingdom. Think of deliverance from oppression. Think of justice for all. Think of the healing of the nations. Then perhaps you too can sing with Isaiah: "For you shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace. For the mountains and the hills shall go with singing, and the trees of the field will clap their hands" (Isa. 55:12).