

## **A Christmas Tree In Bethlehem**

Isaiah 11:1-11:10

I love the British; they have such a dry sense of humor and are prone to do bizarre things to entertain themselves. Back in 2008 an Englishman named Greig Howe bought a 35-foot tall Christmas tree for his house. Now that's a pretty big tree. And you'd expect that Mr. Howe must then have a fairly large house. But he didn't. His was a two story dwelling that was only 30 feet tall.

So, did he just put the tree OUTSIDE his home and decorate it there?

No. What he did was he cut that tree into three almost equal parts and installed them in every floor of his house... including the roof!

He put the bottom chunk that has 10ft long branches in the living room.

The middle part was squeezed into the spare bedroom above.

And the top section, measuring 15ft, was placed on the roof directly above the bedroom.

It took Howe and 7 of his friends 2 entire days to put the tree in place.

Then they decorated it with 160 big ornaments and a whopping 2000 LED lights. It even had a star perched on top.

Today I'm going focus on 3 facts about this tree:

1. It was a "Big" tree.
2. It was a "dead" tree.
3. And (outside of being a pretty tree) it didn't do anything of any value

Greig said: "From the outside it is a bit of an optical illusion because it appears to be one huge tree that has shot up through the ceilings and floorboards and out through the roof."

A tree that "shot up thru the ceiling and floors and out thru the roof"

That's interesting. But that was all just an optical illusion.

Isaiah 11 tells us that God planted a Christmas tree in Bethlehem... but His tree wasn't an optical illusion.

In the previous chapters God said it was His plan to cut down the trees of Assyria and Israel. Of Assyria He says in Isaiah 10:33-34: *Behold, the Lord, the God of hosts, will lop off the boughs with a terrible crash;*

*Those also who are tall in stature will be cut down*

*And those who are lofty will be abased.*

<sup>34</sup> *He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an iron axe,*

*And Lebanon will fall by the Mighty One.*

And of Israel and Judah He declared in Isaiah 9:14 & 18: *So the Lord cuts off head and tail from Israel, Both palm branch and bulrush in a single day. For*

*wickedness burns like a fire; It consumes briars and thorns; It even sets the thickets of the forest aflame And they roll upward in a column of smoke.*

These trees symbolized the power and majesty of those two nations. And God was telling us that He was going to take an ax and go through the forests of their power and He was going to cut it all down. When He finished with them, there would be nothing left of their pride and might.

But then – in the devastation that was left behind he was going to graft a shoot into one of the stumps left behind and grow a new tree. *Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.* Isaiah 11:1

This imagery would have been familiar to the Jews of that day.

Olive trees were an important and valuable tree for people in that region. They were a source of food, medicine, fuel, and a base for the anointing oil they used in anointing their kings, priests and prophets. Spiritually, the oil of that tree represented peace, faithfulness, endurance and... new life.

The reason the tree symbolized new life was because the tree was virtually indestructible.

They could grow in almost any soil and flourish in great heat with little water.

Most Olive trees can live to the ripe old age of 500 years, and some are believed to be over a thousand years old.

One expert explained that “New sprouts and trees will emerge from the olive tree stump roots, even if the trees are cut down.”

Even if a the grove catches on fire a good Olive Tree Grower can graft an olive shoot into the stump of that tree and grow a new tree in its place.

So in Isaiah 11, God is declaring that - in the devastation left behind after the destruction of Assyria and Israel...

- a branch would grow out of the stump of Jesse.
- a branch would be grafted into the tree that had been cut down and destroyed.

So what was this branch?

Or more to the point - WHO was this branch?

Well – it was the Messiah. It was Jesus.

The prophecies about the coming Messiah started in Isaiah 7 where we learned that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son and we would call His name Immanuel. Then in Isaiah 9 God told us this child would minister in Galilee and that He would be a great ruler and leader of His people. And that this Messiah would be a light to those walking in the shadow of death.

And now here in Isaiah 11 we're told this Messiah would be like a great tree growing out of the stump of Jesse.

God was going to plant a Christmas Tree in Bethlehem.

And just like the tree in that Englishman's home, God' tree is a huge tree.

When Jesus had fulfilled His mission – when He came to die for sins and risen from the dead - He ended up having huge influence. More influence than anyone has ever had or ever will.

One person described Him this way:

“He was born in an obscure village. The child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. And then became an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn’t go to college. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.”

Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40 BUT Jesus for only 3 1/2 years. Yet His influence infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined years of the teachings from all the world’s greatest philosophers.

Jesus composed no music. Still Hadyn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in His praise.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is still the central figure of the human race.

All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and the kings that ever reigned have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that One Solitary Life.

That One Solitary Life – that single shoot that had been grafted into the Stump or Jesse - grew to such a large tree that He has changed culture, history. And most importantly He changed our lives.

So, the tree God planted in Bethlehem (Jesus) became a BIG tree.

But it's interesting that this tree didn't just grow out of the ground. It had been grafted into the "Stump of Jesse".

When you buy a Christmas tree, do you just lean it up against a wall in your living room? No, of course not. You have to have some kind of a stand to hold it up.

If it's "alive" you place it in a basin that has a ring through which you place the trunk of the tree. And that ring has 3 or 4 screws that you turn into the wood of that trunk, so the tree won't fall over.

Well... when you buy a Christmas tree ... you have to have something that will hold it up.

If you purchased an artificial tree, they have brackets that slide into the bottom of your tree and hold it up and keep it from falling over.

In the same way THIS prophecy in Isaiah 11 tells us that Christ's tree also needed something to "hold it up."

At one point, in His ministry, some of the Jews challenged Jesus' authority to do and say what He did. And Jesus told them *"If I alone testify about Myself, My*

*testimony is not<sup>1</sup>true.* John 5:31

What Jesus was referring to was the guideline in the Old Testament Law that said you shouldn't accept an accusation against someone unless you had 2 or 3 witnesses (Dt. 17:6)

In that confrontation with those Jews Jesus said that He had several witnesses:

1. His works
2. John the Baptist
3. His Father.
4. AND He ended His teaching with these words:

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me;* John 5:39

In those Scriptures were over 300 prophecies about the coming Messiah - all of which Jesus fulfilled. AND ONE of those prophecies declared that the Messiah would be born of the line and lineage of King David... and David was the son of Jesse. (Thus the "Stump of Jesse).

This prophecy was one of those that "held up" the tree of Jesus' and supported His claims to be Messiah.

Now, that's not true of other men who've founded other world religions.

For example:

About 500 years before Christ was born, a man was born whom we refer to as Buddha. He came up with what he thought was a "good idea" and drew followers to him who agreed that his teachings seemed like a "good idea."

When he died, his followers created a religion around those ideas and it exists to this day.

Buddha arose from relative obscurity and no one had predicted his coming.

There had been no prophetic declaration that such a leader would be born to fulfill the expectations of his people. There was no testimony that supported HIS tree.

And about 500 years after Christ was born, another man was born we call Mohammed. He came up with what he thought was a "good idea" and drew followers to him who agreed his teachings seemed like a "good idea."

When he died, his followers created a religion around those ideas and it exists to this day.

Mohammed arose from relative obscurity and no one had predicted his coming.

There had been no prophetic declaration that such a leader would be born to fulfill the expectations of his people.

There was no testimony that supported HIS tree.

But when Jesus was born, He came in fulfillment of thousands of years of prophecy, and one of those prophecies was that He was to be born of the line of David the son of Jesse.

So, now let's review:

We've seen that the tree God planted in Bethlehem was a BIG tree. And that's nice. It's nice to know that Jesus' one solitary life influenced our world as much as His did.

And we've seen that this tree God planted in Bethlehem was supported by prophecy. And that's nice. It's nice to know that Jesus fulfilled so many prophecies when He came to earth and that there's not a single founder of any other world religion that can claim that.

But Jesus didn't come to earth to be influential.

And Jesus didn't come to earth just to fulfill all those prophecies.

Jesus said ...*I came that they may have life, and <sup>la</sup>have it abundantly.* John 10:10

Jesus came to give life. Jesus came to bear fruit.

*Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,*

*And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.* Isaiah 11:1

Christmas trees don't usually bear fruit. They're usually either dead or artificial.

We have to hang whatever fruit they may have from their boughs.

But the tree God planted in Bethlehem - this Messiah who was to come - this tree would bear fruit. But what kind of fruit was He going to bear?

Well, listen to Isaiah 11:6-9

*And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,*

*And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,*

*And the calf and the young lion <sup>[a]</sup>and the fatling together;*

*And a little boy will lead them.*

<sup>7</sup>*Also the cow and the bear will graze,*

*Their young will lie down together,*

*And the lion will eat straw like the ox.*

<sup>8</sup>*The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,*

*And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den.*

<sup>9</sup>*They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,*

*For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord*

*As the waters cover the sea.*

Now there are people who believe this prophecy is a literal prophecy. They don't believe it has happened yet. They believe a day is coming when literal wolves will lie down beside literal lambs, and children could play with cobras and not get hurt. Well, that might happen someday... but that's not what this prophecy is about.

Right after this section (vss. 6-9) is Isaiah 11:10 which says

*Then in that day (the day when the wolf will lie down with the lamb)*

*The nations will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a <sup>[b]</sup>signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be <sup>[c]</sup>glorious.*

THIS VERSE (11:10) is quoted by Paul in Romans 15:12 and he applies it to the day of the church. He quoted verse 10 (along with several other Old Testament scriptures) to show the Jewish Christians in Rome that God had always planned to include the Gentiles in His church.

So, if Isaiah 11:10 was a description of what the Messiah was going to do in the early church, then verses 6 thru 9 do also.

But I haven't seen any literal wolves or snakes spending time around lambs lately. So, what could Isaiah be referring to?

Well, I have heard of people folks call wolves. This is a phrase we use to describe people who stalk and destroy the weak around them.

And I've known some people I'd call 'snakes in the grass'. These are folks who seek opportunities to strike out and hurt others.

And there are still others who are as gentle as lambs and innocent as children.

They're often the prey of those who seek to destroy.

The wolves and snakes are animals of prey that hurt and destroy anyone close to them. And I wouldn't trust my love around them, or my wallet in their hands.

Society shuns these folks and don't let them near that which is precious to them.

But when Jesus touches people... they are changed.

Jesus fixes what is broken. He heals what is sick. He straightens out what is crooked.

When Jesus touches lives, the wolves and snakes no longer seek to hurt.

They don't want to harm or destroy anything in Jesus' kingdom because they've been changed inside.

Billy Graham related a story of a young man who had come to Christ. He said his father was a cruel man. He beat his wife and his children whenever he got angry.

But then one day, during a Revival, the young man, his mother and the other children became Christians.

A couple of weeks later they watched in amazement when their father also went forward.

From that time on, the young man's father became a different man.

The father who had beaten him, his mother and siblings suddenly became a loving husband/father.

Speaking of his father's conversion he later said "I saw one of the greatest miracles ever done. I saw Jesus turn hatred into love."

In your homes, many of you have beautiful Christmas trees decorated with lights, and tinsel and garland. And that's alright. But those trees are either dead or

artificial. And when the season passes, they'll be thrown away or stored in boxes. But there is another tree – a living tree. And this is the one you want in your home. Because this tree, this Jesus of Nazareth is someone you'll never want to throw out or store away in a box. And that is because of the life and changes He'll bring to your life.

Jesus is the living tree that brings us hope. Remember, God has a plan...God IS the plan...the plan has a name – Immanuel- God with us.

