

Advent: Joy to the World

The Government Shall Be Upon His Shoulder

Isaiah 9:3-7

Mark Vroegop

*You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; **and the government shall be upon his shoulder**, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (Isa. 9:3-7).*

On August 12, 1986, President Ronald Reagan visited the Illinois State Fair in an effort to show his support for farmers. After visiting the fair, he held a press conference where he made a famous statement, "I think you all know that I've always felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help."¹

It was a classic Reagan line which was meant to drive home a point through a tongue-in-cheek statement. There was a great debate raging in 1980s about the role of government in the life of the nation. Gratefully, that issue has resolved itself, and we have widespread national unity today about the credibility and the role of government. (Now I'm the one making a tongue-in-cheek statement!)

I think it's safe to say that there's a cultural distrust of government at nearly every level. What is fascinating is the fact that there's nearly universal cynicism. I don't run into many people who are fans of "the government." But what's challenging is that the diversity of what we're cynical about is incredibly broad. We're unified in cynicism yet deeply divided by the subject or the issue.

And what makes this worse is that it's never been easier to find common-issues cynics, unite together with them, and be convinced that there is no alternative view—there are only enemies.

Do you feel this? It's really challenging and it is, frankly, disorienting in many arenas of life. But it's especially true with the topic of "government."

¹ <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/presidents-news-conference-23>

I have this in mind today because today we are talking about the second phrase in Isaiah 9: “the government shall be upon his shoulder.” I have questions like: What does that mean? Why is it important? What was Isaiah pointing toward? But I also have other questions: How does that statement feel to you? What is your reaction to the phrase? “The government shall be upon his shoulder”—that’s an interesting and loaded phrase. It always was and always will be until that phrase is fulfilled.

The Cultural Moment

The year 1986 had a culture to it. So does 2024. So did 700 B.C. Last week we spent a lot of time exploring the context of Isaiah 7-9. Let me remind you that we are talking about the reign of Ahaz, the twelfth king of Judah who took the throne for sixteen years.²

Ahaz was a bad king who compromised spiritually and caved under pressure. At the time, Assyria was the major superpower in the Middle East. Israel (the northern kingdom) and Syria wanted to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance. When Ahaz learns of their plans, Isaiah 7 says: “the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook like trees of the forest” (7:2). Their plan was to conquer the nation of Judah, unseat Ahaz, and set up Tabeel as king (7:6).

Instead of trusting in the God of Israel, he makes an alliance with the Assyrians, and he incorporated Assyrian worship artifacts into Israelite worship (2 Kings 16:10-16). Rather than trust in the Lord, Ahaz puts his trust in military and political alliances.

At that time King Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria for help. For the Edomites had again invaded and defeated Judah and carried away captives. And the Philistines had made raids on the cities in the Shephelah and the Negeb of Judah . . . For the LORD humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the LORD. So Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him (2 Chron. 28:16-20).

This is a dark day in the history of Israel, and yet chapter 9 tells us that “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa. 9:1). As is so often the case, the darkness of human history is pierced by the bright light of God’s grace. Advent is a time of year in which we consider this reality with the entrance of Jesus into the world. Winfree Brisley writes this:

Christmas is a paradox of longing and fulfillment for Christians. Throughout December, we look back at God’s Old Testament promises to send the Messiah to save his people. Then we see in the gospel accounts how he did exactly what he said he’d do, down to the last detail so as we read Jesus’s New Testament promise to come again, we eagerly await the final day when our rescue will be complete.³

² Allen C. Myers, [*The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 30.

³ Winfree Brisley and Jared Kennedy, eds., *Unto Us: 25 Advent Devotions about the Messiah*, (Columbia, MO: TGC, 2024), 1-2.

Last week I invited you to keep your eyes on the horizon as we considered the phrase “unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given.” Today we’ll consider “the government shall be upon his shoulder.”

The Basic Message

Let’s start by thinking about this at a high level. What’s the basic message here? Well, in the context of a world with nations competing for territory and with the nation divided into two kingdoms, it’s the hope that a coming Messiah would change all of that. It’s the basic longing that the problems plaguing mankind would cease and that there would be true and lasting peace.

The Christmas Hymn “O Come, O Come Immanuel” captures this:

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go.

O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace.⁴

It’s the message of the heavenly host of angels who appear to the shepherds in Luke 2 when they say: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (2:14).

The Advent message is not only about the arrival of a baby, the good news of salvation from sin, but that the Messiah has come to reign. That the King of nations will rule. That God will retake the creation. That his people will have a place. That his kingdom will come. And that his will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, God’s will is not just to save people’s souls. He aims to reclaim everything corrupted by the fall.

As another Christmas hymn says it:

Joy to the world; the Lord is come;
Let Earth receive her King;
Let ev’ry Heart prepare him room,
And Heav’n and nature sing.

⁴ https://hymnary.org/text/o_come_o_come_emmanuel_and_ransom

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness,
And wonders of his love.⁵

This is the basic meaning of “the government shall be upon his shoulder.” Advent is a celebration of the coming of the Christ-child as we look for his second coming as our deliverer-King. Jesus came to redeem *and* reign.

Why Government?

The word that is used in this text for this reign is “government.” The Hebrew word is only used in Isaiah 9:6 and 9:7. The basic meaning in Hebrew is connected to “dominance, power, or sovereignty through legal authority.”⁶

If you think about it, that’s what governments do. They have authority to exercise power. More specifically and significantly, governments have the authority to exercise coercive force. In other words, they can force you to do something. They can enact penalties. Take away your freedom or your life for not complying. In this way, government possesses God-given and God-like authority. It’s a big deal.

I may not like the way that a person drives on the road, but I don’t have the authority to pull him over and write him a ticket. Even though we’re both equally made in the image of God. Even though we both have the same basic rights, I cannot independently exert my authority over him.

Consider what we mean when we say, “Police yourselves.” We mean help each other do what is right. We don’t mean write each other tickets and lock people up. That’s possible but only if you have authority to do so. Government and authority are linked.

But what is the role of a government? Well, just think what life would be like without any government. “Awesome!” you might say. “I could do whatever I wanted.” Perhaps. But so could everyone else. Imagine no speed limits, no property lines, no laws, and no protection. Anarchy would take over. And you can imagine the cultural disaster that would be created.

Some form of government is necessary for human existence and flourishing. In this respect, government is good. However, like so many other good things in the created order, it can be corrupted by our

⁵ https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come

⁶ Logos: “dominion”

individual and collective depravity. But it's not that the idea or the concept of government is fundamentally bad. The solution to bad authority is not no authority. It's good authority.⁷

Without government, the only thing left is brute force—war. And the promise in this text is that the Messiah will one day not only come but also exercise his rule over the earth. He will not only bring peace, he will enforce peace.

Isaiah 11 describes the reign of the Messiah like this:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins (Isa. 11:1-5).

Can you imagine how this must have sounded to the people in Isaiah's day? How does it sound to you? Imagine a ruler and king who not only had ultimate authority, but who was also full of the goodness and grace of God. Well, that king already came as a baby. He died on the cross. He rose from the dead, and he's coming again!

Why Shoulder?

The text says that government shall be upon his shoulder. Why say it like that? I mean you could say, "the government shall be in his hands" or "the government shall emanate from his crown." Why shoulder?

When I looked for other uses of shoulder in Isaiah, I found two I think are helpful.

And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck; and the yoke will be broken . . . (Isa. 10:27).

. . . that I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains trample him underfoot; and his yoke shall depart from them, and his burden from their shoulder (Isa. 14:25).

It seems that in the context of Isaiah, that shoulder is connected to something that is a burden, something heavy, and maybe even something oppressive. We use the word "shoulder" the same way, don't we? You might hear someone say, "I feel like this whole project is on my shoulders." The idea is one of responsibility and work.

⁷ I'm grateful for this insight from Jonathan Leeman's book *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing*.

In the temple worship, the high priest would wear an ephod that included the names of the twelve tribes etched in stones that were placed on his shoulders. He bore their names on his shoulders. When Isaiah says that the government shall be upon his shoulder, it means that the Messiah will take the full responsibility for the establishment of this rule and reign. We need peace, and he's the one who will do bring it about

And the book of Revelation tells us what it will look like:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:11-16).

The government will be upon his shoulder.

What's Your Foundation?

Government is the foundation upon which societies are built. And yet, they are not ultimately worthy of our total allegiance and trust. Government attempts to provide order, justice, stability, and safety. But no human government can provide this in the way that we need it.

This phrase "government on his shoulder" invites us to consider how Jesus is our trust, our hope, and our solid rock. As another song has said, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

- It is Christ who bore our sins so that we could be forgiven: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). On Christ the solid rock I stand.
- It is Christ who told us that he has all authority and that he'd never leave us: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20). On Christ the solid rock I stand.
- It is Christ who told us that life would be hard, yet we would, through him, overcome: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). On Christ the solid rock I stand.
- It is Christ who told us to keep our hearts set on his kingdom: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). On Christ the solid rock I stand.

- It is Christ who tells us to keep our eyes fixed on the future because he is coming soon: “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev. 22:7). On Christ the solid rock I stand.

We long for the day when the seventh angel blows his trumpet:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign” (Rev. 11:15-17).

The government will be upon his shoulder.

Amen.

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