

ISA 11:6 And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,  
And the leopard will lie down with the kid,  
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;  
And a little boy will lead them. [7] Also the cow and the bear will graze;  
Their young will lie down together;  
And the lion will eat straw like the ox. [8] And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,  
And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. [9] 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.

## The Infant's Hand in a Viper's Pit: The Eschatology of Isaiah 11

*Isaiah 11:6-9*

When God created man, He gave him a command to "Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen 1:28). To rule is to be a lord. Man was to be a vassal lord over the Great Creator Kings realm. Now, a vassal lord is a person who holds land from the feudal lord and receives protection in return for homage and allegiance. In this you have the ideas of both stewardship and lordship.

Adam, the vassal king was given stipulations by God that he had to live by. "Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground--everything that has the breath of life in it--I give every green plant for food.' And it was so" (Gen 1:29-30). From this positive command giving permission to eat from any seed-bearing plant and every fruit tree, we understand that there most likely existed a negative prohibition as well. The man was not at this time given permission to eat the animals.

We know that later, man was given such permission. God told Noah after the flood, "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything" (Gen 9:3). With the establishment of the nation of Israel came limits regarding edible food and meat. *The nation of Jews* were no longer permitted to eat unclean animals because this symbolized the separating out and making holy of this nation by God. But in the New Testament era, the Noahic covenant is once again reestablished as the rule of life for all of God's people. So God told Peter, "Kill and eat." Peter replied, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." God then said, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 2:13-15). The purpose of this permission to once again eat unclean animals has little to do with the animals themselves and everything to do with what happens in Christ. So Peter explains what this means, "God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28). "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

But all of this leads to an important question. **If there is nothing intrinsically wrong with eating animals – (how could God give permission for us to do something intrinsically evil?) Why would God not have given the man this permission earlier in the Garden of Eden?**<sup>1</sup> The answer lies in understanding the situation that obtained for the animals themselves prior to the fall. For you see, prior to the fall animals had no fear of man. Man and beast were friends. We know from scientific research that

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith Kline argues that God in fact gave permission and man did eat animals from the very beginning. His argument is interesting, but not completely compelling. See *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 53-55, 255-57, online edition.

even today, when animals have not become accustomed to being around man, they do not fear him and they almost always do not attack him unless provoked. It seems that it is partially the way that we treat the animals that somehow they gain a bred instinct to fear us.

It is important for us to understand that it was because animals and man had a peaceful relationship with each other that Adam was able to so easily obey his command to be the vassal king over the animals. This shows itself to us prior to the fall when Adam is doing exactly what he was created to do. One of the ways he exercised his lordship over this earth was by naming the animals. But we read that “[God] brought [the animals] to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name” (Gen 2:19). It should be obvious that there existed at this point in time a good relationship between the man and the animals.

The same exact relationship existed in Noah’s day. We read, “pairs of clean and unclean animals, of birds and of all creatures that move along the ground, male and female, came to Noah and entered the ark” (Gen 7:8-9).<sup>2</sup> There was no fear among the animals of Noah and his family. It was only after the flood, when God gave Noah permission to eat them that God also placed a dreadful fear of man in them. And so we read, “The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands” (Gen 9:2).

All of this talk about animals and lordship and peace and safety lends itself as an important preface to [Isaiah 11:6ff](#). For in this passage we see something akin to what we have just seen with Adam and Noah. “The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will bead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze; their young will lie down together; and the lion will eat straw like the ox. And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper’s den. 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.”

It is obvious to anyone reading this passage that a literal reading of it has not yet come to pass. There is nothing more true in this present age than that wolves do *not* dwell with lambs; rather they make lamb chops out of lambs! The same is true of each of these pictures. What could be more hazardous to a little boy’s life than to parade around like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, leading a wolf, a leopard, a lion, and a bear down the street? We do not at the present time call a baby just weaned from its mother’s breast or a young child still nursing a “hero” for sticking its hand in a den of vipers or in the hole of a cobra. Rather, doing something this foolish is one of the quickest ways for anyone, let alone a baby, to die very quickly.

And yet, here is the interesting thing. This passage comes right on the heels of [Isaiah 9:1-5](#) where we learn about Jesse’s branch, the great king who will come to rule his kingdom with all wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and the perfect fear of the Lord. We know that this king *has* come, for there is no other hope of the Christian if not this. We also know that this king rules *presently*. Revelation tells us plainly, “Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, [is] the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5). How can it be that the first part of the passage has begun to be fulfilled, while the latter seems not to be fulfilled yet?

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<sup>2</sup> Whether or not this same state existed b/w Adam and Noah or was special only to Noah we have virtually no way of knowing.

Origen, who lived from 185 245 AD, had something very interesting to say with regard to our passage this morning and this idea of Christ being king.

Both the hardened in heart, and the ignorant persons have not believed on our Saviour, thinking that they are following the language of the prophecies respecting Him... Thinking that it was prophesied that the wolf – the four-footed animal – was to feed with the lamb, and the leopard to lie down with the kind, and the calf and the bull and lion to feed together, being led by a little child, and that the ox and bear were to pasture together, their young ones growing up together, and that the lion was to eat straw like the ox: seeing none of these things visibly accomplished during the advent of Him who is believed by us to be Christ, they did not accept our Lord Jesus; but, as having called Himself Christ improperly, they crucified Him.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, if you fail to understand the meaning of Isaiah's prophecy properly, you will be guilty of the same crime as the Romans and Jews: The murder of Jesus Christ the anointed King from Jesse's line.

Now the main question before us is, if these things are not literally fulfilled though the king has come, and if this is supposed to be a passage explaining what this perfect ruler's rule will look like, what in the world does this prophecy mean? When is it going to be fulfilled? In trying to understand the meaning of this, I want to keep before you eyes the overall purpose of the prophecy. [That is, this prophecy is here given for your comfort.](#) Three things come to my mind when I read this passage: **Peace, Safety, and Rest.** All of them are the result of the ruling hand of a (generic? Specific?) youth. The idea is that in the peace that is shown here, you too should have great hope for peace. In the safety that is displayed, you have your own safety and shelter. And in the rest that is had, you too have your rest. This passage is therefore a wonderfully applicable passage for any who are at war (physically, emotionally, or psychologically), for any who feel unsafe and are worried and terrified of things they cannot control, and for any who are weary from lack of rest and the burdens that come upon them from the heavy weight of sojourning in this wilderness land – so long as their master is the king presented here.

There are really three main approaches we can take in understanding when these things will come about. I'm not convinced that we can't in fact combine them in some form or another. We can take a [literal approach](#) and understand that things like the total reconstitution of a lion's innards (so that he can biologically eat straw and not die) may in fact take place sometime in the future. We can take a [spiritual approach](#). This was the way that Luther and Calvin read this text. The animals are thus to be viewed in anthropological language. The animals are figures of people. Jesus does, after all, refer to the wicked as "wolves" and "vipers." Christ is called a "lion." Satan a "snake" and so forth. Or we could take a [figurative approach](#) that understands that while there may be literal points to the passage, the main idea is to convey "through an extended figure of speech... a single, overarching point, namely, that in the Messiah's reign the fears associated with insecurity, danger, and evil will be removed, not only for the individual but for the world as well (Rom 8:19-21)."<sup>4</sup>

*EXPLAIN the meaning of the figure first*

The meaning of the figure (if that is all it is) is surely ground in a literal understanding of what happens when the [hunted](#) (sheep, kid, calves, cows, children) and the [hunter](#) (wolves, leopards, lions, bears, and snakes) have the enmity

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<sup>3</sup> Origen, *Church Father's Collection*, 1.4. p. 356.

<sup>4</sup> Oswalt, p. 283.

between them removed. We can all see from this picture the three main themes I mentioned above. When a lamb is living (*gûr*: "dwell" "inhabit") close to a wolf (*vs. 6*), we can easily see how it would fear for its safety (were it smart enough to know what was going on!). Thus, *safety* is a theme being promoted in this prophetic vision. When a cow and a bear graze together (*vs. 7*), not only do we see safety, but we also see *peace* being pictured. There is no longer hostility between them and all they have to fill their days is the wonderfully lazy experience of eating to their hearts content. When we see leopards lying down with kids (*vs. 6*) and calves lying down with bear cubs (*vs. 7*) something further comes to our mind. This is the idea of wonderful, peaceful *rest*.

### 3 Lads

This all takes place because of *leadership*. What is truly stunning about this is who is doing the leading. It is a "*na'ar qaton*," a small, insignificant youth. Can you imagine the sight of a young boy leading a procession of wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, lions and cows and bears? The thought is something we can only imagine in a fantasy world.

The (*yoneq*) nursing child and the (*gamul*) weaned child are also mentioned here, which is fitting for an entire section of Isaiah that has been filled with little children. These two little ones do the same thing, which is parallelism typical to Hebrew poetry. They both deal with poisonous snakes and come out alive. Indeed, it is more than alive. They come out victors in their game with the snake. The nursing child plays and enjoys the game of placing his hand over the hole of the cobra. The weaned child also puts his hand over the viper's den. The action is significant. For in doing so, the picture is one of closing the opening and escape rout of the snake.<sup>5</sup>

I believe the picture here is very significant. Not only is the curse removed with the child and snake as it was with other animals, something more happens. The snake is not allowed to bite the child even as the child is binding the snake to prevent it from every leaving its hole again. Do you recall the promise given to eve? "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Think carefully. Who is the enmity between? Between a man and a snake! Could it be that here is promised in Isaiah's prophesy the fulfillment of this earlier promise through the hand of a little child? This is in line with everything we have seen up to this point in Isaiah, for every time a young person is mentioned, our eyes are directed towards Jesus Christ.

Tertullian, born about 160 AD, reminds us, "Under the figure of scorpions and serpents are portended evil spirits, whose very prince is described by the name of serpent, dragon, and every other most conspicuous beast in the power of the Creator. This power the Creator conferred first of all upon His Christ, even as the ninetieth Psalm says to Him, 'upon the asp and the lion You [Christ] tread, the lion and the serpent you shall trample under foot' (Ps 91:13).

Isaiah likewise says later, "In that day the LORD will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, with His fierce and great and mighty sword, even Leviathan the twisted serpent; and He will kill the dragon who lives in the sea" (Isa 27:1). Tertullian, I think rightly, understands God's sword to be none other than our Lord Jesus Christ.

You must remember that all of this talk about animals comes as explanation for the King-ruler of Jesse's stump. When it says that a little boy will lead them, I think we

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<sup>5</sup> See Young, p. 389.

do well to identify this little boy with the same infant who puts down snakes and king who establishes David's throne forever! Christ is the ruler of all. If these animals are figures of men – as Calvin and Luther thought – then Christ turns even wolves leopards into docile, submissive creatures who come under his authority. And certainly this is what he has done with you and I, isn't it? But is this all? Is there nothing literal to be understood here? I think that because of **Gen 3:15**, what we have said about animals prior to the fall and other such things that we do have good reason to think this is *more than just spiritually symbolic* as Calvin taught.

*Go back to tell when this will happen – use Isaiah 65 etc. (KNOWLEDGE IS EVERYWHERE, Isaiah 2:2) etc...*

If animals existed in this peaceful state at one time, why not at some time in the future? Most Christians in our day do understand this to be a literal prophesy of the future. Some understand it to be the state that will obtain *during a millennial rule*. The idea is that during a 1000 year physical reign of Christ prior to our glorification, there will be a change in the animal world and other such things. I no longer hold to this view, however for some important reasons.

There is no mention in this passage of anything at all like a millennial rule. One has to insert this theology into a text that it is completely absent from. Furthermore, we have other Scriptures that tell us exactly when this is going to take place. **Isaiah 65:17-25** is a long passage that parallels this one. We won't read it all here, but we will mention a couple of things. First, **65:25** says, "The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the dust shall be the serpent's food." These are the same animals in the same condition we find them in in **Isaiah 11:6-9**. Furthermore, **Isaiah 65:25** ends thusly, "They shall do no evil or harm in My holy mountain." **Isaiah 11:9** reads, "They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain." It's the same thing!

But unlike **Isaiah 11, chapter 65** tells us exactly when these things will take place. Premillenarians would do well to consider **Isaiah 65:17** in their defense of their position. "For behold, I create *new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*" This is when these things will happen. It is when God makes all things new. The millennium as understood by premillennialists is most definitely *not* this time - for sin still exists and wars will still happen in the future. The millennium can hardly be said to be the new earth! Is God going to have to make a new earth twice, once after the tribulation and then again after the final war at the end of the millennium?

What we have then in **Isaiah 11:6-9** is a glimpse of heaven itself. This is a mystery beyond both your comprehension and mine. Yet, surely we understand it to be true. **Christ – the young man – is going to return.** This is what the Jews have never understood from their own book. They still await his *first* coming. But when he comes the next time, it will be to put an end to all things only to make that which we have now – new. It will be a time of judgment. The day of salvation and repentance will be past. But now I want to ask another question. If this is heaven, how does this comport with the fact that Christ is even now reigning? Or to put it another way, is there nothing about this passage that we can say is true during our own time?

This is what I think throws so many people off. It is the fact that this seems to be something that should be happening now (or at least prior to the new heavens and earth) that makes people like Calvin spiritualize the text (to make it for today) or

that makes premillennialists want this to be about a time prior to the eternal state. For you see, Christ really is reigning now, isn't he?

It is true. He has not yet made all things subject to his rule. Satan is in a sense still the ruler of the air. Sin is in a sense not yet put under Christ's authority. Evil abounds everywhere on a physical level – because all things are now in the process of being brought under Christ's subjection. But Paul says ""Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:55). He does not say there is no such thing any longer as death. He says that its sting and victory have no more authority – PRAISE BE TO GOD! And this is the way it is with Christ's rule on this earth now.

For you see, while it is true in a sense that Christ has not in some senses destroyed all evil, in another sense, he has. We understand this to be a spiritual thing – which is why we live even now by faith and not by sight. One day we will live by sight. But not yet.

Christ is the king, now. His kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, now. "The kingdom of God is near (Luke 10:9 etc.)" because the "kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). And "the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Cor 4:20). The kingdom of God is powerful because the King of the kingdom is reigning. He reigns spiritually in his spiritual kingdom. Thus we are commanded by the Apostle, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Col 3:15).

Isaiah says, "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" (11:9). I take the "they" who will not hurt or destroy to be the snakes that have been closed up in their dens. If the children in Isaiah are all pictures of Christ, then we have to remember that this same Christ came already as a child! Thus, it is even now true that the infant has put his hand into the viper's den.

Jesus said this exact thing with a different picture: in terms of a **strongman**, "no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man." The parable makes it clear. The strongman is Satan and he has been tied up by this same Christ who defeated Satan at the cross. This is, I believe, the meaning of Revelation 20:2, "He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." This is a spiritual binding and the thousand years of Revelation 20 are currently taking place! The millennium is the same thing as the church age! How can we say something that seems to absurd? Because the roaring lion who seeks to destroy *may now be successfully resisted* until such a time as the "thousand year" period between the first and second advents of our Lord draw to an end. The dragon has been de-clawed, the lion defanged for all who trust in Christ. James is clear. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). **The roaring lion has become the cowardly lion for all who have faith. He holds no power over God's children.**

This is the reason that Paul writes to the Ephesians, "And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (1:9-10). And he said to the Colossians, "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things

in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:19-20). Such is the power that is even now taking place in Messiah's rule over this earth.

Let's return to that picture of [the holy mountain](#). The holy mountain has been talked about by Isaiah before. You will remember back in [chapter 2](#) that this mountain is Mt. Zion. Through Christ, the Lord is establishing his temple. He is raising it above the hills. And the nations are streaming to Christ like a iron is attracted to a magnet. We learn that "He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa 2:4). We learn that he will judge between peoples and settle disputes, just like he does here in [chapter 11](#). "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore" (2:5). It's the same picture of the end of all things, one that is wonderful to all that trust Christ as their saviour.

On that day, the Lord will make a covenant with the whole earth. Ezekiel says, "I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety. I will bless them and the places surrounding my hill. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them" (Eze 35:25-27). Hosea says, "In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety" (Hos 2:18). Jeremiah says, "And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all now Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, 'for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more' (Jer 31:34).

Hebrews and the rest of the NT clearly say that these things are a reality *now*. [I hope you can see how incredible this all is: a future hope that is realized \(though not exhaustively\) now!](#) They are a spiritual reality for those that know Christ. "You *have come* [not you "will come someday in the future] to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (Heb 12:22). And to "Jesus the mediator of [Jeremiah's] new covenant" (12:24). Christ has overcome the serpent, he does lead men into his kingdom even now, and the knowledge of God – the knowledge that is here said to spread over the whole earth like is spreading throughout the whole world even as the waters cover the sea – is happening as we speak! This is the beginning of the kingdom of God establishing itself over the rule of wicked men. I can very much understand why Christians can be cynical of present happenings in our own day. But given this knowledge, how can any Christian ever give up that perfect hope and an idealism that recognizes that nothing is ever going to put a stop to God's reign upon this earth. And nothing is ever going to put a stop to God's church which is the primary tool that God uses to create his realm and spread his authority over all things in our age? Above all else, we should be people that never give up and never give in to the cynicism of our age. For we have the only answer there is. It is Jesus Christ!

### *Peace*

So then, let us return for one last moment to the main ideas given in this text. You see now that the hope of heaven pictured in the animals is meant to give you hope *now*. It gives you hope now because heaven is itself intruding upon this world of men. Christ's reign is beginning. As animals that were enemies will one day eat

together, so too has Christ brought us reconciliation with God. "When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son." Now here's the hope of the gospel! "How much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Rom 5:10). "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1).

### Safety

As the lamb will safely live with the wolf, so too God's people are now safe to live with God. And one day all of creation will itself be liberated from the terrible bondage of sin that has brought this terrible mess about for it. We read about safety even in Hosea. "All may lie down in safety." Listen to the hope for both us and the whole world from Romans 8:18-21, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." Isaiah is remarkable because it shows a great continuity between the present world and the world to come – especially regarding animal life. Don't get caught in the trap of thinking that your hope is a heavenly disembodied hope and that God doesn't care about his physical creation, including the animals that are so precious to him. Though I don't understand much, I do know that they will have their place in the next world and it will be the same place that they originally had in this one: To be the servants of mankind to help him rule this earth as God intended for him to do.

### Rest

And finally, as the former enemy animals lay down together, so too God gives his people rest. As so often happens when you read Scripture as a story, we return to the beginning. God foreshadowed this rest in his own Sabbath which he took on the seventh day after creation began. "God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work" (Gen 2:2). God instituted this rest in the form of Sabbath commands for the people of Israel so that they might reflect upon the intrinsic goodness of their own work and so that they might rest for a day as they dwelt peacefully in the presence of their own former enemy.

But God also gave this rest to the people as a foreshadowing of the rest that is to come, the very rest that is pictured for us here as these animals teach us about an eternal rest. Hebrews tells us that this rest is here even now in Jesus Christ. When his own work was finished on the cross, our Lord rested for three days in paradise. If you trust Christ, you too enter this rest. "We who have believed enter that rest" (Heb 4:3). And yet we also know that "There remains, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest" (Heb 4:9). The Sabbath principle continues to this very day because that eternal rest that was pictured for us so long ago has not yet obtained in all of its fullness, for we are not yet glorified people. We have spiritual, but not yet physical rest!

The picture before you is still, after all, one of *heavenly* (and interestingly physical) hope. Heaven is being ushered into this world as we speak. But we still hope for more. I pray for all of you that you will place your hope in Christ today. He is the little child that leads the wild beasts. He is the infant who binds up the serpent. He is the judge who comes in all righteousness and wisdom of the Spirit. He is the King who rules even now in this age. He is the bringer of peace, of safety and of rest.



His reign has begun now in this, the age of the Spirit. Tomorrow it will consummate in the physical reign of the mighty King Jesus in the new heavens and new earth.