

# Isaiah 66:7-13 Zion's Birth Story (Labor & Delivery Sermon)

Monica Romig – Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary – 11/17/2021 Chapel

Link: <https://www.facebook.com/GordonConwell/videos/446972870121143>

*Monica Romig shared the following message at Gordon-Conwell's chapel service on Wednesday, November 17th, 2021 from Isaiah 66:7-13. She talks about the biblical imagery of labor and delivery to describe how God is going to deliver and redeem his people. Enjoy the message.*

Since shops are already putting up Christmas lights and radio stations are playing Christmas music I thought it would be appropriate to consider this morning one of the prophetic birth passages of Isaiah.

**7** “Before she was in labor, she delivered;  
Before her pain came, she gave birth to a boy.  
**8** Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things?  
Can a land be born in one day?  
Can a nation be given birth all at once?  
As soon as Zion was in labor, she also delivered her sons.  
**9** Shall I bring to the point of birth but not give delivery?” says the Lord.  
“Or shall I who gives delivery shut *the womb?*” says your God.  
**10** “Be joyful with Jerusalem and rejoice for her, all you who love her;  
Be exceedingly glad with her, all you who mourn over her,  
**11** So that you may nurse and be satisfied with her comforting breasts,  
So that you may drink fully and be delighted with her bountiful breasts.”  
**12** For this is what the Lord says: “Behold, I extend peace to her like a river,  
And the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;  
And you will be nursed, you will be carried on the hip and rocked back and forth on the knees.  
**13** As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you;  
And you will be comforted in Jerusalem.”

Oh, were you expecting something about a Virgin and Immanuel? Actually birth imagery is all throughout Isaiah. Before we get too far in I want to recognize for a moment that while pregnancy and childbirth and breastfeeding are joyous and celebratory, they also have the potential to be extremely trauma inducing and painful for women to talk about or engage with. We live in a fallen and broken world and this experience of bringing forth life has been inexorably tied together with discouragement, and dysfunction, and even death. Statistically speaking, the likelihood is that someone, maybe many people, in this room has been personally or closely affected by infertility struggles or pregnancy loss of some sort. And that loss, while it isn't always shared with others, or mourned publicly, is a real loss. I'm going to pray for us, and if you need to slip away during that time I completely understand. Let's pray.

First let's consider the birth story of mother Zion in verses 7-9.

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**9** Shall I bring to the point of birth but not give delivery?" says the Lord.

"Or shall I who gives delivery shut *the womb*?" says your God.

When I was pregnant with both of my kids I was obsessed with birth stories. With my son I listened to podcast episodes every time I was in the car. With my daughter I binged a Canadian reality show/docu series that followed different women in their labors and deliveries. I wanted to know everything I possibly could about this event that was going to take place. I think I felt like if I saw and heard every possible situation I would be more able to predict what would happen to myself. I would have some sort of control. Of course that's not how anything ever happens.

With my first pregnancy I had all sorts of confidence. I had done a 12-week childbirth class, we toured the hospital, I read books and listened to podcast episodes and ate figs and drank raspberry leaf tea. I exercised and stretched and felt like I was going to conquer this thing no problem. After nearly 36 hours of labor, an epidural, an oxygen mask and an hour and thirty-eight minutes of pushing, I was just so relieved when my son was born. And so was my husband, who was there the whole time.

After that experience when I got pregnant again I was ready to mentally prepare for another tough slog. I heard stories from friends who had easy quick deliveries and sat in bitter jealousy, smiling and saying, "oh how wonderful for you" but secretly cursing them for having it so easy. Of course I was destined for another marathon of pain. And then when the fateful night arrived I told my husband to try and sleep and we'd go to the hospital in the morning. After 5 hours of contractions, as I was getting ready to head to the hospital and get my sweet sweet pain relief, my husband woke up at 5:00 AM, and 13 minutes later my daughter in our bathroom. My husband slept through all but those last 13-minutes and then got credit for "delivering his own child." (air quotes)

The promise of Isaiah 66 would not have been received well by me after my first birth. How terribly unfair that Zion gets a painless birth while I suffered for nearly 40 hours. Thanks Eve. And even though my second child came much easier and quicker it still doesn't come close to the promise for Zion. Zion will give birth before labor, before birth pains, and God will guarantee the speedy and painless delivery.

Any woman who has given birth or contemplated the idea knows the amount of trepidation you face with the prospect of a part of your body usually constricted opening to the diameter of 10 centimeters. Your entire midsection tightening, contracting, squeezing the small body that has been living inside of your own down, and slowly out over the course of hours. And then, the final exertion necessary to extrude this 7 to 10 pound creature who you have been feeling kick and stretch and re-position, beyond your body and into the world. And that presumes an uncomplicated pregnancy, an ordinary birth, a healthy delivery. There are so many things that can go wrong. And those thoughts and anxieties were palpable as I prepared for the birth of both of my kids.

But here, Isaiah 66 takes all of that and turns it on its head. The amount of relief in this text can only be appreciated in contrast to the amount of pain and worry that accompanies the birth process. Back in Genesis 3 God curses Eve with the prospect of pain in childbirth. Ancient Israelites understood birth pain to be so severe

that it was a logical result of a curse directly from God. And throughout the Bible and throughout Isaiah the language of birth pain and travail is used as a warning of how the Israelites and their enemies will experience the pain of battle and the judgment of God. The pain is known to be so excruciating that even hardened warriors will wail as they experience an approximation of it in battle. There's no epidural from God's judgment.

As modern readers, unless you or someone very very close to you has given birth, you probably are not intimately familiar with the process of childbirth. I know I wasn't. Before I had my kids the only references I had were television and movies and brief anecdotal stories from my mom about my own and my sister's birthdays. It seems as though women get very pregnant, one day their water breaks out of nowhere, they rush to the hospital and look pretty ouchy for a little bit, scream right at the end, and there's a baby. But the Ancient Israelites would have been much more familiar with the mechanics, if only the sounds. There were no hospitals and labor wards and sound proof walls. Women in pain giving birth must have been familiar for both men and women based on the amount of times it's used as a recognizable illustration in the Scripture. And I don't think it's coincidental that Isaiah's wife bears children during his time as a prophet.

So what do we gain by understanding this birth imagery in this text? What exactly is being communicated about God and His plan for His people?

Zion will give birth without pain, she will deliver before going into labor. This promise is for the renewed and restored people of God following the Babylonian exile. They will be a kingdom who seems to pop into existence as if from nowhere. They will be children of the personified Zion, the city of David, the mountain of God.

Zion is personified in verse 8. Zion originally refers to one of the mountains of Jerusalem where David conquered and established his rule, and ultimately became synonymous with Jerusalem, God's dwelling place, and God's people. In Isaiah Zion is personified both as a daughter (16:22) and a wife (54:5) a virgin (37:22) and a harlot (1:21), a barren woman (54:1) and an expectant mother (66:8). These contrasting metaphors highlight the tumultuous relationship God has with His people. We could attempt this with some modern examples. New York City, a driven and relentless business woman, trading her power suit for a flashy dress of city lights every evening? Or Los Angeles, a sun drenched woman of means, surgically enhanced and technologically airbrushed? If we were to personify South Hamilton and describe her as a woman, what descriptive words might we use? She is quiet and dignified, settled and reserved. She sleeps with the sunset and awakens gently with the chirp of birds. It's a fun game to play with whatever locality you most identify with. What is the essence of that place? Of those people? For Zion it was not only her geographical features of being a mountain and a city, it was also the significance of the house of God, the location of the temple. The earthly Zion acted as a placeholder for the heavenly Zion, the ultimate throne room of the omnipresent God who fills the heavens and the earth. And it was even more than that. As a woman personified Zion represented the people of God. The people in their good and their bad, being punished in their rebellion and being rescued and redeemed from their oppressors.

So what is the text communicating about God's people through Zion's birth story?

**7** "Before she was in labor, she delivered;  
Before her pain came, she gave birth to a boy.

**8** Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things?  
Can a land be born in one day?  
Can a nation be given birth all at once?

As soon as Zion was in labor, she also delivered her sons.

**9** Shall I bring to the point of birth but not give delivery?" says the Lord.

"Or shall I who gives delivery shut *the womb?*" says your God.

God is promising the creation of a new people that seems to come from nowhere. In other parts of Isaiah God encourages Zion as a barren woman to make room in her tents for multitudes of children. That from the north and the south her children will come, surprising her in her bereavement. And similarly here, the promise of God's people is something surprising, something extraordinary. They will be born before pain, delivered before labor. In Isaiah's time the threat of Assyria and Babylon was menacing. The remnant during the exile would have been wondering, "Will God's people ever rise again? Will they be dispersed among the nations, forgotten forever?" And this text would have been the ultimate encouragement. NO! Even though all seems lost, the temple is destroyed, Jerusalem has fallen, God has not forgotten. His people will arrive with all the joy of a new baby and none of the toil of labor. And God guarantees it.

Verse 9 almost seems callous in light of all the things that can go wrong in childbirth. Sometimes babies do come to the point but are not delivered successfully. And that fact was surely known to the original audience. But God is saying here, this birth, the birth of His people, will be beyond what is natural and possible according to our own experience. This birth breaks the curse of Eve. This birth is one that stands in defiance of the sinful broken world we live in. This birth is a new birth, one that is only experienced as part of the miraculous redemptive plan of God. Because God is pictured alongside the birth process. He is both Creator and midwife, ensuring that this birth accomplishes His divine purpose.

I don't think it is inappropriate to read into this text the promise of new birth in Christ. Zion in the New Testament becomes a shorthand for the church, for God's people, for the Kingdom. In Hebrews and in Revelation Zion is where the glorious congregation of all of God's people throughout time are brought together in worship. So we are part of Zion. We both look back and look forward to the ultimate picture of Zion fulfilled, but even in this moment as we are part of God's people, and part of His Kingdom we too can put our identity in the concept of Zion. Birth imagery extends throughout the New Testament as Jesus Himself chastises Nicodemus for not understanding based on the Scripture that God would have His people be "born again." Born into a new birth, a new life, a new creation. Not a physical birth of pain and labor but a spiritual birth leading to a new life.

And we see the fulfillment of this promise at Pentecost in the book of Acts. Later in this chapter the text says that God's people will include the exiles returning triumphantly, but also people from other nations and tongues. Part of how this nation will be given birth all at once is through adoption through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are part of the fulfillment of this promise. Our spiritual adoption into God's family brings us into this mothering relationship with Zion. As the church we are born anew into the family of God. So this next part I think has something specifically for us.

**10** "Be joyful with Jerusalem and rejoice for her, all you who love her;

Be exceedingly glad with her, all you who mourn over her,

**11** So that you may nurse and be satisfied with her comforting breasts,

So that you may drink fully and be delighted with her bountiful breasts."

Verse 10 changes the focus of the promise. It is no longer focused directly on Zion but rather on the audience. The imperatives "be joyful" and "rejoice" and "be exceedingly glad" are for the reader to take courage in knowing that a time of prosperity will come to God's people. Undoubtedly she will go through a time of trial,

hence those who will mourn over her, but ultimately she will be redeemed. And this redemption is not just that Zion will survive, but she will thrive. She will be able to provide her children with abundant sustenance from herself. Here the text uses the second mothering image, that of the breastfeeding mother nursing her children until they are satisfied.

In 1860 baby formula was invented. Before that there were very few options when it came to feeding infants. Breastfeeding was common and when a mother was unable to breastfeed wet nurses were employed to feed babies. Breastfeeding is yet another thing that we are separated from as a modern western society but would have been more widely understood in the ancient world. If not among humans, as an agrarian society ancient Israelites would at the very least have been familiar with animals nursing their young. Today breastfeeding is somewhat mysterious. Because of our modesty standards surrounding women's upper bodies, breastfeeding in public is rare and uncomfortable. Even among family members it isn't practiced openly or discussed. We don't live in a tribal region where toplessness is normal. In fact, it's possible that some of you are squirming at the fact that I'm about to go into detail on the ideas presented in verse 11 where Zion is described as having comforting, bountiful breasts. But the fact is that breastfeeding was the only way to feed and nourish a baby during this time and the text uses it to make a really important point.

Zion will be so full of prosperity that the reader is encouraged to nurse, be satisfied, drink fully and be delighted. The word here translated as "be satisfied" is used in this exact way two other times in the Old Testament, in Ezekiel and Joel. In Joel God promises grain, new wine and oil that will be satisfying. The image in Ezekiel is that of a feast table where there is so much food and drink and sacrificial offering that the recipient is glutted. All three references give the impression of not only eating to sustain life, but eating to the point of over-fullness.

Before visiting some relatives in Croatia for the first time my grandmother gave me a piece of advice. She said that food and hospitality was very important in that culture, and at any meal being served by one of these cousins I needed to eat until I could touch it. It's a gross image, but it was certainly memorable. That's the kind of eating described in these verses. There is so much food being provided that the person eating is stuffed.

This promise in verse 11 parallels the promises of verses 7 and 8. When people think about the difficult physical parts of bearing children they often think of the pain of pregnancy and childbirth, but I'm not sure they really appreciate the physical challenge of breastfeeding. The promise that,

**11** So that you may nurse and be satisfied with her comforting breasts,  
So that you may drink fully and be delighted with her bountiful breasts."

That's an amazing promise. It's almost up there with pain-free childbirth. Breastfeeding is as old as time, and it's natural, and our bodies were designed to do it. But it is challenging, painful, and costly. And this isn't a modern invention. In an Egyptian medical document dated to around 1500 BC the prescription is given for rubbing a woman's back with warm sword fish bones to help produce milk so she can feed her child. I never microwaved fish bones, but during the course of my two kids I have used heat packs and cool packs, eaten oatmeal and other foods that are supposed to help produce milk, used lanolin oil and sunflower lecithin, drank special herbal tea, purchased nipple guards and silicone pumps, lost countless hours of sleep feeding my kids, reading online articles about feeding my kids, and worrying about whether or not they were getting enough to eat.

The promise here that the reader can rejoice in Jerusalem and Zion because she will be able to provide them with an overabundance of nourishment, that they will be satisfied and drink fully from her bounty is a promise of true surplus and lavishness. It is the promise that you will not only drink water from a well, but be able to swim in an ever flowing spring. Not only will you be able to rest and take a nap, you will be able to sleep until you wake up on your own, without an alarm clock, and even when you try to fall back asleep you just can't because your body has just had more sleep than it knows what to do with. It is complete physical satisfaction. Milk drunk

And what exactly is being promised here with this imagery? That God's people will be completely taken care of. That Zion's prosperity will be so great that there is blessing to spare. But let's talk about today. As we've noted, we are the people of Zion. We are the fulfillment of God's promise to create this new community of people. Can we receive all that we need and more from our mother Zion? From the church and people of God today?

As a room of seminarians, current and future ministers in churches and ministries and organizations, I want to address something you may have already encountered. There is an idea that church is kind of like a school. That people are like students, going to learn about God and the Bible, and that their way of doing that is listening to the teacher, the pastor.

I teach Bible at a Christian school. Because we're a small school, students are sometimes together with the same classmates and the same teacher for multiple years. Over the course of that time we build relationships with each other, sometimes they come and ask me for advice or tell me about what's going on in their personal lives. And over the course of the 7 years that I've taught there I have seen God change lives. I have seen the Spirit move. But at the end of the day, my primary function is to teach them information about the Bible and skills so they can interpret the Bible for themselves. A teacher is wonderful, but a teacher is not a mother.

What I am not suggesting is that if you go into academics you get to be a teacher but if you go into pastoral ministry you have to be a mother. It is the church all together that provides for the needs of the people within it. God provides for our needs through His word, through the indwelling presence of His Spirit, and through his incarnate people in physical relationship meeting tangible needs. We are the hands and feet of Christ. We are the bountiful breasts of Zion.

A newborn baby is completely dependent on their mother. And their mother is able to provide for them because she knows what they need. And she knows what they need, not because they are able to clearly communicate it, but because they cry and she gets to know them and their schedule and their needs well enough to know when they cry they need to be changed or be fed or to take a nap. Husbands, don't worry. There's an app for that. Sometimes those cries and those needs make perfect sense to the mom because of "mother's intuition", because of her own experience, because she knows her baby and can hear the nuance in her cries. In your church, in your Christian fellowship and community, are you proximate enough with others to know what they need? Are you up-close and personal? When needs arise, do your people know each other well enough to instinctively know how to help? When someone cries, do you know if it's a cry for attention or something deeper?

I was born and raised in Massachusetts. I'm a native New Englander. I know we don't make it easy on each other. But sometimes we can see this lived out. Recently we had a death in the family and my husband went out of town. One of the families from church texted me saying, "I'm bringing over dinner, which of these two options do you want?" And when the wife came over to drop off the food, she noticed our lawn was looking a

little overgrown. And she texted me later, “My husband is coming over to mow, when is convenient for you?” With those interactions, that family showed motherly love to ours. They knew we needed food, they knew we needed care, and they provided. And it meant so much to me.

I know we’re busy, I know we have our own families and our own lives. But we are the Church, we are the people of God, we are the fulfillment for this season of this promise for Zion. How have you received care recently? Are you allowing yourself to make your needs known? If a baby doesn’t cry it’s hard to know it has a need. Are you putting your ability to take care of yourself over the opportunity of the church body to care for you? Or are you allowing yourself to be nourished and sustained and satisfied. And on the other side, how have you cared for others? How attune are you to the needs of those around you, even those living down the hall or sitting across the table? No one is entirely self-sufficient. Everyone has a story. If you haven’t had an opportunity to help someone, or receive help from someone, you are closing yourself off to the promise that God makes in this text. As a baby is nourished by their mother, so God’s people, the church, feeds us and cares for us and helps us experience God’s gracious satisfaction.

I do not think that pastors are called to act as mother figures for all the people in the church. It is only collectively and in community that we will be able to show the kind of provision described in the text. I was recently having a conversation with a local pastor that really solidified this for me. He was telling me about how during Covid many people in his church aren’t attending in person so he’s trying to maintain relationships with them via emails and phone calls. And he’s exhausted. Maybe some of you can relate. And it’s because right now, a lot of pastors are in a situation where they are like the center of a wheel, with each relationship they are maintaining with church people like spokes going out. But no one individual can fulfill that role. When we all come to church and we’re all in relationship with each other it’s like a web. Through community we can provide, individually we are not enough. Pastors, you are not called to mother every individual in your congregation. But I do think pastors and leaders have a unique role in guiding the community to make these things happen.

Mother’s intuition is a thing. But so are parenting classes. I’ve needed classes on childbirth and CPR. In the hospital multiple lactation consultants and nurses came to show me how to nurse and swaddle and bathe my own child. I’ve sought advice from friends and relatives and strangers on the internet for all sorts of mothering questions. Because it’s not all instinctive. So as leaders and ministers, it is our responsibility to encourage and coach others into this caring capacity. Does your community need a “CPR” class to learn how to handle emergency situations? Our church had a coaching session with a local Christian counseling office. Mothers can’t be experts in everything, they can’t be the be all and end all for their children. But they can learn how to best care for them and help them seek the care they need from others as well.

**12** For this is what the Lord says: “Behold, I extend peace to her like a river,  
And the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;  
And you will be nursed, you will be carried on the hip and rocked back and forth on the knees.

**13** As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you;  
And you will be comforted in Jerusalem.”

Nursing mothers need to eat well. Breastfeeding burns between 200 and 500 calories a day. And they need hydration, more water is always recommended, by some sources up to an additional 30 ounces a day. One of the things our hospital gave us when my son was born was a giant water bottle. Because nursing mothers get thirsty. As Zion nurses her children she won’t have to worry about a giant water bottle because God will

provide water. And as a child receives nourishment from their mother, we have our needs met by the Church but ultimately this promise of provision is only possible because of the power of God.

God promises to extend peace like a river and the glory of nations like an overflowing stream. The sustenance and nourishment that Zion provides is ultimately provided and sourced by God. And our comfort and consolation and care is only possible in community through the provision of God Himself.

When parent imagery is used in the Bible, God is most often described as father. However, God is also described using mother imagery. Here in chapter 66 it says, "as a mother comforts her child so I will comfort you and you will be comforted." And in Isaiah 42 God takes on mother imagery explicitly in verse 14 where He says that He will groan and gasp and pant like a woman in labor as He prevails against His enemies and saves His people.

In the New Testament we see Jesus take on mothering imagery as well in Luke 13 where He says **34** *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who have been sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her [a]young under her wings, and you were unwilling!* God incarnate desiring to mother these children of Zion. Jesus says this as He enters Jerusalem. His words point forward to His own sacrificial act of love that will bring about the Creation of a new people. You see, for Zion the birth of this people is painless, but there IS a labor that brings it about.

Jesus on the cross endured pain and suffering and travail in order to bring about our deliverance, our delivery. Like a mother experiencing pain self-sacrificially knowing that it will bring life, Jesus was lifted up and physically crushed in an act that brought life to His people, to us. The promises of Isaiah 66 can only be fulfilled through the loving sacrificial act of God Himself.

And truly, while we are living in the fulfillment of this prophecy in this already/not yet season, we are really looking forward to the ultimate fulfillment. When, as Isaiah puts it in chapter 26 the earth itself will give birth to the dead, the new birth of new life and resurrection. Isaiah ends this chapter and the book with the promise of the New Heavens and the New Earth, when God will gather his triumphant exiles and people from all nations to worship Him forever. And we live on this side, expectantly waiting for that promise to come to fruition.

They say that after the baby is born, a mother looks at her newborn and forgets all the pain of labor. I think that's very hyperbolic. Because when my kids were born, I remembered all the pain. I still remember the pain if I sit and think about it. And healing after childbirth can take weeks, months, longer. And some things are just permanently changed. Like Christ glorified maintaining his wounds from the cross. BUT, I will say, as I look at my kids day by day. As I see them start to grow up, and I get to have a relationship with them, I don't look at them and think about what it took to bring them into this world. I look at them and I delight in them. I delight in carrying them on my hip, or rocking them back and forth on my knees. I delight in who they are and that I get to be their mom. And you guys, our Lord delights in you. He delights in you. And one day we will get to share in that delight completely, together as brothers and sisters, for eternity. Let's pray.

### **Benediction – 1 Peter 1:3-5 (NASB)**

**3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **4** to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, **5** who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in *the* last time.