

Lesson 1 Introduction to Interpreting Isaiah

Introduction

I have an exercise that I like to do sometimes with participants in class or Bible study. I will read you a passage of Scripture, and I'd like you to tell me who the passage is talking about and who wrote it. Who do these words describe and who wrote the description?

- | | |
|--|---|
| ³ He was despised and forsaken of men,
And like one from whom men hide their face | A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. |
| ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, | And our sorrows He carried;
Smitten of God, and afflicted. |
| ⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
The chastening for our well-being <i>fell</i> upon Him, | He was crushed for our iniquities;
And by His scourging we are healed. |
| ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray,
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all | Each of us has turned to his own way;
To fall on Him. |
| ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
So He did not open His mouth. | Yet He did not open His mouth;
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. |
| ⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
That He was cut off out of the land of the living | And as for His generation, who considered
For the transgression of my people, to whom the
stroke <i>was due</i> ? |
| ⁹ His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Because He had done no violence, | Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. |
| ¹⁰ But the LORD was pleased
If He would render Himself <i>as</i> a guilt offering,
He will prolong <i>His</i> days, | To crush Him, putting <i>Him</i> to grief;
He will see <i>His</i> offspring,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in
His hand. |
| ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul,
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
As He will bear their iniquities. | He will see <i>it and</i> be satisfied;
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities. |
| ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
Because He poured out Himself to death,
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, | And He will divide the booty with the strong;
And was numbered with the transgressors;
And interceded for the transgressors. |

Who was that about? He was pierced through for our transgressions... like a lamb led to the slaughter... he would render himself as a guilt offering... My Servant will justify the many? That's got to be Jesus. Right? Who else could that be?

Ok. It is about Jesus. Who wrote it? Who wrote that description? The most common response I get is Paul. "He will justify the many." That sounds like Paul. But Paul did not write that. Who then? The next response I get is one of the Gospel writers. "A lamb led to the slaughter." Or "With a rich man in his death." Sounds like the Gospels. But this was not written by Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, or John. Who wrote it? These are the words of Isaiah, 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

We are starting a new series, Interpreting Isaiah. In this series we will use Alec Motyer's titles for the three major sections of Isaiah. He calls them, The Book of the King, The Book of the Servant, and The Book of the Anointed Conqueror. Those are all Messianic titles. Jesus is King. Jesus is Servant. Jesus is Conqueror. There is so much prophecy in Isaiah concerning the Messiah and humanity's rescue from sin and corruption, this the book is sometimes referred to as, The Gospel of Isaiah.

Isaiah's words regularly find their way into Christian hymns, ancient and modern. The earliest Christians felt a strong affinity to Isaiah. When we consider direct quotations of the Old Testament (allusions to the Old Testament are trickier to count), but when we consider direct quotations, Isaiah is the second most quoted book by New Testament authors. It is quoted more than 80 times, more

than all the other prophets put together, and ahead of number three - Deuteronomy - and just behind the book of Psalms.

Isaiah not only gives us conceptual background to New Testament thought and a wealth of prophecy concerning Jesus; Isaiah's vision of God and call to faithfulness in a time of religious lip service, internal turmoil, and international politics proves to be quite relevant to modern times. Isaiah saw God full of His glory filling the earth. Isaiah saw the corruption of society, but not only as one standing on the outside judging. He saw his own corruption, as well. "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips!" He felt his own sinfulness in contrast to feeling the holiness of God. As a result of his vision of God and His holiness, and recognition of his own corruption, Isaiah sought to live in faithfulness to that vision of God in every level of life; on the level of personal morality, on the level of social justice, on the level of national politics. And he called the faithful followers of Yahweh to live in the same way. Isaiah urged his contemporaries to live by faith according to a true vision of who God is and with a humble awareness of their own human frailty. Isaiah's witness in this prophecy will display the glory of God's nature. It will pierce our souls with wonder and conviction. It will urge us towards a sincere, faithful walk with God.

Now, before we get into the text of Isaiah, there are two major topics to address if we are going to interpret Isaiah well. Modern readers face two major challenges in reading and understanding the prophets. First is historical context, and second is poetry. The prophets wrote to the people of their times. The primary context for them was not historic. It was modern. It was their times. If I make a reference to the Middle East, or the Kardashians, or the White House, you know what I am talking about. The people of Isaiah's day would have no clue what I was talking about. This happens all the time in sermons. The speaker knows he can assume a basic knowledge about people, and places, and events. So, he doesn't give explanation. And that creates a problem for us in reading the prophets. They do not explain their references, just like a teacher today would not explain his references. So, looking back into their writings, we need some help with the historical context. We also, at least most of us, need help with poetry. Poetry is not easy to read a lot of and to understand. And I know this is true for those of you educated in the West. We just don't spend a lot of time anymore learning how to appreciate poetry and how to read poetry. And the poetry of the Bible has its own distinctive qualities.

So, it's true, even if we do not understand the context or do not do well reading poetry, pieces of Isaiah still speak to us. Like Isaiah 43:1, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!" It's lovely. It speaks to your soul. That's not the voice of God to people 2700 years ago. That's to you! That's to me! Enough of Isaiah is accessible to us to help us see the beauty, and importance, and relevance of the book. But to understand the flow of thought of the prophet, but if we're going to get into the book of Isaiah, to begin to understand the flow of thought more and more on our own, we are going to have to address the historical context and poetry. We will do that as we go through this series as we are in the text. I also want to do it by way of introduction in our first two episodes. In this one, we will begin with the historical context and then, in the next episode I will give an introduction to Biblical poetry as we get more into the text of chapter 1.

The Goal of This Series

Ok. Before we talk about historical context. Here are a few words about the approach I will be taking with this series. I am considering this series a serious first pass of Isaiah. We would get bogged down in the details, if we were to address every verse of Isaiah before we have a strong grasp of the book's structure and flow. We kind of need to do two things at once. We need to be looking at the details and keeping in mind the bigger picture. I don't just want to give an overview of the big picture. I want to get into the text. That is the goal of observetheword. So, we are going to get into a lot of text. But at times, to keep us moving along in this first pass, I will cover some larger sections by addressing representative passages. We will just get into parts of the text, not every verse.

I also want to say, I am not an Isaiah expert. I am an amateur who is growing in love and appreciation of the book of Isaiah. I will in this series focus on giving you what I see from my own observations in the text and how I interpret that text. For assistance, especially with the historical context and poetry, I will be looking to some experts for help. The two commentaries I am depending on the most are John Oswalt's two volumes on Isaiah in the in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament series, and Alec Motyer's, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. So those two last names are O-S-W-A-L-T and M-O-T-Y-E-R. Those are the two guys I am depending on the most. If you don't have access to those commentaries or the money to pay for a technical commentary, but you still want a commentary you can use to kind of check your own observation, do a search for Tom Constable, C-O-N-S-T-A-B-L-E, a former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. His notes are all online. You can them for sure at netbible.org in the notes window, which is on the right under the tab, Constable's notes. Constable provides a good introduction to Isaiah and helpful background notes through the text. And he has made his commentary available for free. So that is a big plus.

That said, I encourage you to spend most of your study time doing your own observation of Isaiah. The word of God is alive and active through the power of the Holy Spirit. And our own familiarity with the Word that enables us to discern what we read in the commentaries and the teaching we hear from others. You know, we need to know the text ourselves. It does take some hard work with Isaiah. It takes some reading over and over. And the more we do it, the more it will start to make sense.

Alright. Now we are ready for an introduction to the historical context of Isaiah. And to figure our historical context, we have to ask who is the author, what was the time of writing, and who was the first audience?

Author: Who wrote Isaiah?

We start with the author. Who wrote Isaiah? Well, that seems simple enough. Isaiah 1:1,

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz *and* Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

The prophecy only refers to Isaiah as the author. There is no suggestion of another author in the book of Isaiah or in the New Testament. New Testament authors quoting from all the major sections of this book attribute their quotes to Isaiah. So, beginning to end, the whole book is attributed to Isaiah. So we can say that the internal Biblical evidence clearly asserts Isaiah to be the author of the whole text. And there is no direct external evidence that anyone else wrote Isaiah.

Nevertheless, if you study theology or religion in a state school or a liberal Christian institution in the United States, somewhere like Yale or Princeton, or if you read a commentary from someone who does not accept the literal inspiration of Scripture, you will encounter the widely accepted hypothesis that Isaiah comes from three sources. You know, three Isaiahs. Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote chapters 1-39 or most of it. Second Isaiah wrote chapters 40-55. And third Isaiah wrote chapters 56-66. Furthermore, Second and Third Isaiah are not necessarily individuals, but understood to be schools of Isaiah followers who have worked together to produce their perspective sections of the book.

For me personally, I am fully ready to accept the internal witness of the Bible that recognizes Isaiah as the sole author of the book. But since there is this widespread view outside of those who accept the Bible's authority, it is worth saying a few words about it. And as critical questions often do, addressing the challenging will give us helpful insight into the literature and historical context of Isaiah. Three significant issues are raised by those who propose multiple authorship: style, content, and historical context. Let's start with style.

Style

You do not have to be an Isaiah scholar to notice the difference between chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66. You know, the more you read it, the more you'll see these don't feel quite the same. The first major section of Isaiah alludes often to contemporary historical events and mixes in some prose narrative with the poetry. We encounter a narrative about Isaiah and King Ahaz in chapter 7 and then later in chapters 36-39, another narrative about Isaiah and King Hezekiah. And looking at the poetry of chapters 1-39, there appears to be a combination of spoken messages spanning Isaiah's career that were later brought together in a carefully arranged structure. you know, not written all at once but having different points, and sometimes out of chronological sequence but then carefully put together.

We do not encounter any more prose narrative about historical events when we move into chapters 40-66. And the allusions to historical events cease to be contemporary. In these chapters, we are looking much further into the future. It becomes difficult to connect the prophecy in 40-66 with a specific time in Isaiah's life. And the poetry of 40-66 flows together as a whole. It doesn't seem to have been put together as a product of an oral ministry, but rather as a complete written work that flows from beginning to end. Scholars tend to evaluate this poetry in these later chapters as even better than what is found earlier in Isaiah.

So, we can recognize these differences in style between chapters 1-39 and 40-66, and that moves us to ask, "Why? Why are the sections different?" The answer that there is a different style because there are different authors is not the necessary answer to the question. In fact, one of the problems for posing three authors to Isaiah is that there only seem to be two different styles. The modern hypothesis separates 40-55 and 56-66, but those sections do not show significant stylistic differences. Not only that, but parts of 1-39 seem to be right in line with the style of 40-66. So, three different authors is not clear at all.

It is also not clear that the same author is not able to employ different styles. Consider the differences between the Gospel of John, the letters of John and Revelation, all written by the same author, but they are very different styles, different genres. If Isaiah did write the whole book towards the end of his ministry, but he used previous oral messages as a basis for 1-39 and then wrote 40-56 as an original work for the book, that would be one cause for differing styles. He put the parts together differently.

My favorite Old Testament professor, Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus, became a Christian the same month that he received his doctorate in English poetry from Harvard. He believes there is one author of Isaiah. His dissertation was titled, *Dialectical Process in the Poetry of Shelly*. So, he is as much a poetry expert as he is a theology expert. I remember Dr. Niehaus using W. B. Yates as an example of a poet who wrote over a lifetime employing significantly different styles. He also argued that we should expect development in the life of a poet who has a long career. So, if Isaiah did bring together earlier poetry in the first half of his book and then later in life wrote the second half, we should not be surprised at all if the second half does seem more mature. In fact, we might expect that.

Content

Another argument offered for different authors has to do with a difference in content between chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66. The argument depends on the claim that there are significant differences in repeated words and phrases between those three sections. But if Isaiah has intentionally created a three-part section to his work, and he develops different major themes in each section, we should not be surprised at a change of terms: that some words would show up a lot more in one section than another section. For example, if the first section focuses on the Messiah as King, but not the Messiah as servant, the terms associated with Davidic kingship may be emphasized much more in that first section, you know, chapters 1-39, whereas terms related to a suffering servant would pick up in chapters 40-55. Again, that is not evidence of two different authors.

On the other hand, we also see certain words and phrases remain consistent through the book. Isaiah has a favorite special name of God that connects to the vision of God he had in chapter 6, you know, the "holy, holy, holy." He refers to God as the Holy One of Israel 29 times. And yet, outside of

Isaiah, that name for God appears only 7 times in the rest of the Old Testament. So, 29 times in Isaiah, only 7 times outside of Isaiah. But the usage in the book of Isaiah is consistent: 13 times in chapters 1-39 and 16 times in 40-66. That title seems to link the two halves together as though there was one author.

So, it is good for us to recognize these differences in style and content, but even as we do so, there is no need to suppose separate authors. What about historical context?

Historical context

The three different contexts in the book are possibly the most significant reason scholars propose for separating Isaiah into three sources. Let's do a bit of historical review. The first verse of the book gives us the span of Isaiah's ministry.

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

So, from Uzziah to Hezekiah. And we should probably start at the end of Uzziah's reign, since Isaiah's vision and calling in chapter 6 happened the year Uzziah died. Moving from Uzziah to Jotham, it's hard to see events in Isaiah connected to that king. The prophecy picks up in chapter 7 with Ahaz and carries through Hezekiah's reign. Tradition says that Manasseh, who followed Hezekiah, executed Isaiah. Manasseh's reign began in 697 BC. So, Isaiah's ministry, from the death of Uzziah to the beginning of Manasseh, covers roughly 40 years, from 740 to 700 BC.

That time span coincides with a rise in power that took Assyria from being one of the regional powers between the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates, to being the major power of the Middle East, an unstoppable empire that would subjugate even Egypt eventually. Tiglath-Pileser III came to the throne in 745 BC. He is the cause for the initial crisis described in chapter 7. Ahaz decides to be pro-Assyrian, which does not turn out well for Judah, but ends up even worse for Israel. Shalmaneser V takes the throne after Tiglath-Pileser and before he dies, he conquers the Northern Kingdom of Israel and exiles its people.

Sargon follows Shalmaneser and Sennacherib follows Sargon. In this period, Hezekiah reverses Judah's policy, deciding not to be pro-Assyrian but to be anti-Assyrian and pro-Egyptian. That does not go well for Judah, either, though after repentance on Hezekiah's part God rescues Jerusalem.

Chapters 1-39 cover this span of time from the Judean kings Uzziah to Hezekiah, and the expanding Assyrian empire from Tiglath-pileser to Sennacherib. The Assyrian crisis, the fall of Israel and the near escape of Judah, that is the historical context of chapters 1-39. The same period covers the span of Isaiah's ministry.

Chapters 40-55 look ahead to the eventual fall of Judah and the Babylonian exile. The cry that begins chapter 40 is not for the Northern Kingdom already carried off, but for the Southern Kingdom that will eventually bring the full extent of the Covenant curse down on itself. Chapter 40 begins this way,

¹ "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. ² "Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed,
That she has received of the LORD's hand Double for all her sins."

That is a cry to comfort Judah for the exile that is going to come under Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon a hundred years after Isaiah. The Babylonians and the Medes will accomplish the unthinkable, defeating the mighty Assyrian army. Nebuchadnezzar will assert himself, consolidating his empire and turning against Judah for refusing to pay tribute. The first defeat of Judah comes in 600 BC. Three waves of exile ensue with the eventual destruction of the Temple in 586 BC. Then something even more unthinkable than the defeat of Assyria happens. Coming out of nowhere, the Persians defeat the Babylonians and take over their empire, extending it to unheard of proportions. Cyrus the Great's rise of power is marked from 539 BC. The Persians allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. They rebuild the Temple in 515 BC, 70 years after it had been destroyed. More Jews return with Ezra in 458 BC and then more with Nehemiah in 444 BC.

This period, then, from about 600 BC to 450 BC is the period covered by the prophecy of Isaiah in chapters 40-55. So, it is either an example of the first Isaiah seeing into the future, or a second writer prophesying during those times. The book of Isaiah looks even further into the future in chapters 56-66. Those are post-exile times, looking ahead even to the end of the age.

It is very helpful to recognize that we are addressing three different historical contexts in these three main sections. It is also helpful to recognize that most Biblical prophets are speaking first to their contemporary situation and then applying future prediction to those circumstances. Prophets are usually calling the people of their day back to Covenant obedience and telling them what is going to happen if they don't return to God.

Scholars have then taken these principles and applied them separately to the three sections of Isaiah. There are three different historical contexts. Biblical prophets speak to their contemporary society, so we must have three different prophets speaking in three different periods.

But that is not a necessary way to view what is going on in Isaiah, nor is it even the most helpful way to understand Isaiah. Chapters 1-39 establish the contemporary context of the prophet. Those are his days. In chapters 40-55, Isaiah is doing what all Biblical prophets do. He is communicating future consequences that will come on Judah if they refuse to walk in Covenant faithfulness. And he is communicating the eventual restoration that God will provide after God executes punishment on Judah. Biblical prophets often shift from future calamity and blessing into prophecy about the far distant future, the end of days. Isaiah does that in 56-66.

The three different historical contexts we find in Isaiah are not contrary to the types of future prophecy we find in the other Biblical prophets, though Isaiah has provided a highly developed vision of the future.

And that turned out to be the real problem for scholars who do not believe the Bible is truly God's Word. We come to the problem of prediction for those who have an anti-supernatural bias.

Prediction and Anti-supernaturalism

Personally, I believe this is the main motive for holding on to the theory of different authors in light of continually growing voices insisting on the unity of Isaiah and the consistent quality of the poetry within the book. The book truly gives the stamp of a single author.

But that idea creates significant problems if you do not accept the possibility of supernatural prediction of future events. If Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote this book, then the book contains some awesome, impressive prediction.

Now, Isaiah prophesied that Judah would escape the Assyrian threat and Israel would not. And that happened in his lifetime. Well, Isaiah prophesied that the much weaker kingdom of Babylon would somehow be the power that would defeat Judah and send them into exile. That happened a hundred years later. Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus, an unknown king of a barely known people would somehow overthrow Babylon and for some unknown reason show enough favor to Israel that he would allow for their return. That happened more than a 160 years later. Isaiah further prophesied that a child would be born of a virgin, that a light would shine in Galilee, that a son would be given, that a servant would be pierced, and that our iniquity would be taken away. That happened more than 700 years later.

How do you handle that if you believe that true scholars, true historians must reject the supernatural? You handle it by suggesting three authors at three different times, so that they weren't really predicting the future. And then you build your arguments around that proposition. So, it is not the text of Isaiah that ends up suggesting the presence of three authors. It is the unspoken presupposition that supernatural prediction cannot happen that truly underlies the theory.

Not too long ago, the accepted opinion about Isaiah 53, the passage I read at the beginning of this episode, the accepted opinion was that some Christian inserted that section of poetry into Isaiah some time after the death of Jesus. It is just too accurate to have been written before the death of

Jesus. The scholars were sure, you know, this is clear evidence of Christian tampering with the text. It did not help the Christian cause that the oldest copy of Isaiah was in a manuscript from 900 AD. so that's a lot of time separation. That is 1600 years from the original. We have no way to prove that that copy of Isaiah really represented the writings of someone from 700 A.D. We couldn't prove that a Christian had not inserted that passage.

But then one day in 1947, a Palestinian shepherd boy, watching over his sheep, began tossing rocks into a nearby cave. Why was he doing it? Why not. That's what boys do. How far back can you get the rock in? He listened to the dull sound of rock against rock. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Shatter! That wasn't rock on rock. That was a clay pot. And he knew it when he heard it.

The clay pots discovered in that cave contained seven scrolls. The cave was about a mile or 1.6 kilometers northeast of the Dead Sea. One of those Dead Sea scrolls contained the entire text of Isaiah in Hebrew. Even non-believing scholars attested that the scroll was at least as old as 100 BC. And that text was essentially identical to the manuscript that we had from 900 AD. In 1000 years of copying, there were not significant differences to the text. In this scroll, copied at least one-hundred years before the birth of Christ, was that same text of Isaiah 53 that we have translated in our Bibles. The suffering, death, and atonement of the Messiah was prophesied at least a hundred years before Jesus, I believe 700 years before Jesus, by Isaiah. Those predictions came true. And if those predictions came true, why would we also not consider that the exile to Babylon and the return under Persia were true predictions?

The only reason to deny Isaiah as the true author of the book of Isaiah is a rejection of the Bible as the Word of God and a rejection of supernatural prediction through the Holy Spirit. Isaiah was written by Isaiah of Jerusalem, a prophet of God who served Him during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

That is the answer to the question about authorship and that establishes the broad historic context that we are looking at. I have two more questions about the precise historical context. What was the time of writing and who was the primary audience? We can answer those questions quickly based on these prior comments.

Time of writing: What was the context when the book of Isaiah was written?

Time of writing: What was the context when the book of Isaiah was written? We know that Isaiah 1-39 spans the whole of Isaiah's ministry from Uzziah to Hezekiah. When did he actually put together the book of Isaiah?

We cannot know for sure. This is what I think was going on. I believe we have passed through the events described in chapters 36-39. The Northern Kingdom has fallen. Sennacherib's army was turned back at the gates of Jerusalem. Hezekiah is close to death or has died. Manasseh's reign is about to begin or has begun. And that is a dark time for the faithful in Judah. Manasseh set up Canaanite idols in the Temple of God, encouraging the worship of Asherah and Baal in Yahweh's house. This is the point of no return for Judah. 2 Kings 21:11-13 reports God's judgment.

¹¹ Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who *were* before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; ¹² therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing *such* calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle. ¹³ 'I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

Isaiah wrote very close to this time period with an awareness of Judah's decline that was not wholly dependent on a vision of the future. This beginning of the end of Judah was his time. This is when I think he wrote this book.

Audience: Who was Isaiah written for?

For whom then did Isaiah write? Who was his audience?

I believe Isaiah's primary audience was the faithful remnant living in those challenging times. Idolatry, oppression, and sexual immorality were becoming the norm. Judeans paid lip service to God, going through the motions of religious ritual, feeling secure in their inherited religion, but not even trying to translate their beliefs into God-honoring practice in their nine-to-five life.

Isaiah calls the faithful remnant back to a vision of God found in the written Word. We get a particular example in Isaiah 8:16-18,

¹⁶ Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. ¹⁷ And I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him. ¹⁸ Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. ¹⁹ When they say to you, "Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter," should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? ²⁰ To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

Isaiah was writing for these faithful Jews walking with God in dark times. The state of Judah would go up and down, but the road will steadily descend. Isaiah challenged them to live according to their vision of God. Do not put your trust in your own passions. You will find no salvation in following your heart. Do not put your trust in pro-Assyrian or pro-Egyptian politics. You will find no salvation through any human leader. Do not put your trust in the spiritual practices of the culture around you. You will find no salvation in false religion. In this difficult cultural reality that you live in, turn to the Word, turn to the testimony, know your God. He is your dawn. Look to him in the darkness and eventually you will see light rise up over the horizon.

That's written for those Jews, written in that time period after the fall of Israel and the beginning of the end under Manasseh. It is also written to us. "To the law and to the testimony!" This is why we study Isaiah. We are responding to his call. We are returning to God's Word because we want a fresh and growing vision of who God truly is. We study Isaiah's times to better understand our times, so that we can live as faithful followers of the one true King.

Reflection questions

1. On a scale from 0 to 10 how comfortable do you feel with your ability to study the Old Testament prophets? (Compare that with the book or portion of Scripture you feel most comfortable studying and the portion of Scripture you feel least comfortable studying).
2. What are some reasons the prophets are hard to study or understand or apply?
3. What is your favorite prophetic book to study or the one you know best? And why?
4. Was the historical context provided in this lesson just a review for you or did you learn some things you did not already know? What stood out to you? What is a part of that history you would like to know more about?
5. Skim through the beginning and end of each major section of Isaiah. Look at chapters 1, 36-39, 40, 55-56 and 66. What are some things that stand out to you when you just skim over these sections?
6. Make a plan for observing Isaiah or parts of Isaiah in conjunction with listening to the Interpreting Isaiah series. You may decide to read through the whole of Isaiah. What parts would you also like to observe closely? If the book seems too big to tackle, what are one or two parts you would like to start observing more closely?
7. Consider downloading the Kings and Prophets chart from observetheword.com. Print the chart and stick a copy in your Bible so you can reference when it would be helpful.

Lesson 2 Isaiah 1:2-9 Studying Biblical Poetry

Introduction

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>² Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth;
“Sons I have reared and brought up,
³ “An ox knows its owner,
<i>But</i> Israel does not know,
⁴ Alas, sinful nation,
Offspring of evildoers,
They have abandoned the LORD,</p> | <p>For the LORD speaks,
But they have revolted against Me.
And a donkey its master’s manger,
My people do not understand.”
People weighed down with iniquity,
Sons who act corruptly!
They have despised the Holy One of Israel,
They have turned away from Him.</p> |
| <p>⁵ Where will you be stricken again,
The whole head is sick
⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head
<i>Only</i> bruises, welts and raw wounds,</p> | <p>As you continue in <i>your</i> rebellion?
And the whole heart is faint.
There is nothing sound in it,
Not pressed out or bandaged,
Nor softened with oil.</p> |
| <p>⁷ Your land is desolate,
Your fields—strangers are devouring them in
your presence;
⁸ The daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in
a vineyard,
⁹ Unless the LORD of hosts
We would be like Sodom,</p> | <p>Your cities are burned with fire,
It is desolation, as overthrown by strangers.
Like a watchman’s hut in a cucumber field, like a
besieged city.
Had left us a few survivors,
We would be like Gomorrah.</p> |

That’s Isaiah 1:2-9. Isaiah writes with force and surprising imagery, using common realities, like a donkey at its manger, the relationship between father and son, or a hut in a cucumber field to create pictures in our minds, connecting those pictures in surprising ways that communicate powerful ideas. It is one thing to appreciate the sound of Isaiah’s poetry. It is another thing to understand it. Some of the ideas become clear in our minds but not all of them. And not always in a way that we can follow.

We must overcome two significant challenges to interpret Biblical prophecy: historical context and poetry. We addressed the issue of historical context in our first lesson of this series. The problem of historical context comes from the prophet’s role of delivering messages to a particular people in a particular context. And the prophets assume those people know the historical context, just like any preacher would, so they do not give a lot of explanation. And it worked. And those people did know the context. But we don’t. So, we struggle to understand a lot of the references to people, or places, or events.

Isaiah gives us some context, particularly with his references to Uzziah, Ahaz, and Hezekiah who were all three kings of Judah during Isaiah’s ministry. But with such a long book, Isaiah makes a multitude of references that we will need some help clarifying if we are to understand the point he is making.

Historical context is our first challenge in interpreting the prophets. Poetry is the second. I am going to cover Isaiah 1:2-9 in this lesson by looking at three different ways to approach Biblical poetry. I am not going to get very technical. I am not a Hebrew scholar, nor am I a poetry scholar. We do need the help of scholars. There are things that we will miss by not being able to read the Hebrew. But it is also true that Hebrew poetry continues to communicate very well in translation. Using some simple methods in our own language we can experience and understand an impressive amount of Isaiah.

There are reasons that Hebrew poetry translates so well. I’ll give you three. First, Hebrew poetry is dependent on parallel structures. The basic mode of Hebrew poetry, whether we are looking at hymns like the Psalms or wisdom literature like Job; or the prophets like Isaiah, is based on movement from one verset to the next; one phrase to the next. We will talk about that more in a bit. The point here is that the poetry is not fundamentally dependent on rhyme, or rhythm, or word play. Those can exist but that is not the fundamental mode of Hebrew poetry. The fundamental mode is

structure. And whereas rhyme is quite difficult to consistently translate from one language to another, structure can be translated well.

A second reason Hebrew poetry translates well is the use of stock phrases and bold imagery. A stock phrase is a term or phrase that gets used so often, the reader immediately understands the basic intent of the phrase. Poets can then use that phrase creatively. But the point is that the phrase itself is understood because of its regular common use. Isaiah's use of Sodom and Gomorrah in verse 9 is an example. All he has to do is state the names of those two cities and immediately we think of utter human depravity moving God to completely destroy in His wrath. A lot is said just by mentioning Sodom and Gomorrah. Along with stock phrases, powerful images can also translate well. We will consider some examples in a bit.

A third reason Hebrew poetry from the Bible translates so well is that it is true to the human condition. Biblical poetry communicates to our reality because the poets see with God's eyes. Poets want to help us see and experience something. Biblical poetry has the advantage of being inspired by God, so that the truths of the poet convict and inspire in a way that really is true to reality. You do not have to be a Hebrew from 700 BC to experience the human relevance of Isaiah.

Continuing on with the premise that Hebrew poetry translates well, I am going to describe for you three simple approaches to the study of Biblical poetry. All three approaches require spending time in the text and all three approaches focus on observing what the text says. Good interpretation and good application follow from good observation. This is the number one mistake I see Christians making in Bible study: trying to come up with some deep wisdom or spiritual principle from a passage of Scripture so often leads to nice ideas that have no real connection at all to the text at issue. Observe what the text says. Then observe again. Then observe again. Then take a step back and observe the text in its larger context. Only then, having looked intently at what the text says, you can begin to consider what it means. And a lot of meaning will flow naturally out of what you have seen.

The three approaches I will suggest can be used wherever you encounter poetry in your Bible. And you will encounter a lot of poetry in the Old Testament. A full third of the Old Testament is poetry. And that number increases to 45% after the books of Moses. From Joshua to Malachi, almost one half of the text is poetic verse. For this lesson, I will stick to Isaiah 1:2-9 as I give examples. I am using this lesson both as an introduction to observing poetry, and as a beginning to our study Isaiah's text.

Approach to Biblical poetry #1: Read and observe.

The first approach is to simply read the poetic passage and take note of what you see. This is the first step of inductive Bible study. Observe the text and write down your observations, because writing makes you think about what you're observing. As you read, ask the reporter questions: who? What? When? Why? Where? You want those questions to become second nature as you observe any text of Scripture.

When observing Biblical poetry, you do need to engage your imagination. Keep in mind that the study of poetry is both a left-brain and a right-brain activity. The left side of your brain processes more analytically, linear, and logical. The right side of your brain process more imaginatively, artistic and intuitive.

One year in our morning Bible time with our three daughters, we observed the Psalms together. The girl of the day would read the passage, and we all had fifteen minutes to write down observations. Then, starting with the girl of the day we went around in a circle and shared our observations. I loved the different approaches that came out naturally over that year. Julia was more likely to comment on verses that gave the bottom line or the idea of the text. She was processing more analytically. Claire was more likely to observe emotion words in the text, to feel it, processing more emotionally. Ana was more likely to see the dragons and butterflies. She can picture the images, processing imaginatively.

Poets use descriptive language so often to stir up emotion or to create a visual scene. The poet takes great care to choose just the right words and place those words in just the right order. So, in

observing poetic verse you need to intentionally engage your imagination as you observe. Ask, “What visual scene do these words and phrases create?” And ask, “What emotions are being expressed or what emotional response might the poet expect from the reader?” Try to see it, try to feel it.

So, choose a text like Isaiah 1:2-9 and read it through, then write down your observations. You may not want to do this in a linear way at first. Especially if you are a more left-brained analytical thinker. Allow your mind to skip around the text. You can come back later and put it into order. I will read our main text again and just even as you listen, what is some image that stands out to you?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ² Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth;
“Sons I have reared and brought up, | For the LORD speaks,
But they have revolted against Me. |
| ³ “An ox knows its owner,
<i>But</i> Israel does not know, | And a donkey its master’s manger,
My people do not understand.” |
| ⁴ Alas, sinful nation,
Offspring of evildoers,
They have abandoned the LORD, | People weighed down with iniquity,
Sons who act corruptly!
They have despised the Holy One of Israel,
They have turned away from Him. |
| ⁵ Where will you be stricken again,
The whole head is sick | As you continue in <i>your</i> rebellion?
And the whole heart is faint. |
| ⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head
<i>Only</i> bruises, welts and raw wounds, | There is nothing sound in it,
Not pressed out or bandaged,
Nor softened with oil. |
| ⁷ Your land is desolate,
Your fields—strangers are devouring them in
your presence; | Your cities are burned with fire,
It is desolation, as overthrown by strangers. |
| ⁸ The daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in
a vineyard, | Like a watchman’s hut in a cucumber field, like a
besieged city. |
| ⁹ Unless the LORD of hosts
We would be like Sodom, | Had left us a few survivors,
We would be like Gomorrah. |

So, in this approach we are just reading and observing. I will share some observations. And I am going to go linear to make it easier for you to follow me. I notice some repeated words. For example, the people of God are referred to as “sons” and later Jerusalem as a “daughter.” So, there is familiar language I noticed. The word, “know,” also gets repeated. I also notice some similar words, not just the repeated words, like in verse 4 which describes Israel four different ways as “sinful nation,” “iniquitous people,” “evil offspring,” and “corrupt sons.”

What have they done? In verse 2, they have revolted. And in verse 5, they have rebelled. In verse 4, they have abandoned Yahweh. They have despised the Holy One of Israel.

And that stands out to me: despised the Holy One of Israel. The striking contrast to the verbs for the people. They are sinful, iniquitous, evil, corrupt. Yahweh, however, is the Holy One. Maybe you notice that name for God here right away in this passage while you are observing, or maybe you would not notice it until later. As you go through Isaiah, you will notice the repetition, “Holy One of Israel.” It is going to recur 29 times. When we get to chapter 6, we will make the connection to Isaiah’s vision of God as “holy, holy, holy.” Isaiah never loses that vision that came at his initial call. He sees God as pure and holy. The people of Judah stand in stark contrast.

There are several striking images in this passage. There is so much, you will not take it all in. But with each passage take one or two of Isaiah’s word pictures and let your imagination go. What do you see? What does the word picture look like in your mind’s eye?

For example, imagine the pictures in verses 5-6.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ⁵ Where will you be stricken again,
The whole head is sick | As you continue in <i>your</i> rebellion?
And the whole heart is faint. |
| ⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head | There is nothing sound in it, |

between the vassal people and the suzerain king. God, of course, is not going to call pagan gods as witness to His Covenant with Israel. In Deuteronomy, however, Moses symbolically calls Heaven and Earth as witnesses to the Covenant. Deuteronomy 30:19-20,

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, ²⁰ by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him...

Moses said, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today." That may be what Isaiah is doing right here. Even if we do not catch this connection to Covenant witness, we get the main idea. Isaiah is calling Heaven and Earth to pay attention to something. Pay attention! Look at this! Look at what? Verses 2b-4 describe Judah as "rebellious children" who have turned away from God in their wicked behavior. The description begins with an image of ox and donkey, then turns more concretely to the behavior of the Jewish people.

Verses 5-9 then describe the devastating consequences of the people turning away from God. First, we get the image of the wounded man in verses 5 and 6. That is followed in verse 7 by a more concrete description of a desolated land, with burned cities and loss of the harvest to invaders. Verse 8 provides another image of a hut in a cucumber field that pictures a besieged city. The devastation is terrible enough that Isaiah can bring in the stock images of Sodom and Gomorrah as a comparison. It is only the grace of God that has left a remnant.

What I have just done here is simply move through the text line by line, attempting to follow Isaiah's flow of thought. You want to try and be as specific as you can identifying the idea present in each verse or set of verses. Prophecy in Isaiah often sounds familiar. As we go through the chapters viewing the text generally, we encounter descriptions of sin, judgment, consequences of blessing and curse, calls to repentance, and visions of hope. We are going to get a lot of that and it's going to run together. By identifying more specifically the kind of sin, or the instance of judgment, or the particular hope promised, we can differentiate between similar passages and better see the movement within a particular passage. By identifying the specific idea present, trying to be specific, we also avoid drawing in ideas that are not yet present. We want to allow Isaiah to develop the idea of judgment, or the idea of sin, or the idea of hope as we go along, so we don't want to bring everything into the first instance, everything we know. We just want to observe what is he telling us here.

You also want to look for ideas that may be suggested, but not clarified to see if Isaiah will come back to those ideas. For example, the question in verse 5 stands out to me. "Where will you be stricken again, as you continue in your rebellion?" The treatment of the Jews as children in the preceding verses causes me to think of God the Father wondering how to discipline His rebellious children. Like He wants to spank them, but there is no place on their body that He can put His hand. They are so wounded, there is nowhere else left to strike the child. The discipline does not seem to be doing any good at all. This child can take a beating without ever turning back. This child takes the consequences and plunges willfully ahead.

But it is too simple to look at the injury to Judah simply as the discipline of the Father. The pain described after verse 5 comes from an invading army. How does that work? Is it God's hand or an oppressive enemy? Or both? We will have to wait and see if Isaiah works out that. It also seems to me much of this pain comes from the behavior of the people. Sinful and wicked actions have natural consequences that can bring pain and suffering. How does that work with God's discipline? Is it directly the hand of God, or is it God giving people over to the consequences of their own behavior?

Those are some questions that come up as I observe this passage, but I should not be too eager to answer at this point of my observation. There are answers to these questions elsewhere in the Bible, but I want to know what Isaiah has to say about it. So, I'm waiting. Verse 5 raises the questions in my mind but not seeing answers here, I will wait and see whether Isaiah addresses those issues about discipline and consequences later. And maybe later I'll see that I'm not getting the passage right. So

by holding on to those questions I am not jumping a conclusions that might not be there, but I might also later be affirmed if Isaiah comes back to it and addresses it, I will say, "Oh yeah, I was getting the right idea.

Okay, one more thing about observing the thought of a particular passage. By observing verses 2-9 we are now set up to see if there is any logical connection to the next passage. Isaiah is very intentional about the placement of his prophecies. And often he links passages together with a key word. The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah in verses 9 and 10 is an example of that passage. You ought to look for linking words in Isaiah. The first passage ends in verse 9 this way.

⁹ Unless the LORD of hosts
We would be like Sodom,
Had left us a few survivors,
We would be like Gomorrah.

Well, the next passage in Isaiah chapter 1 begins in verse 10 this way.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD,
Give ear to the instruction of our God,
You rulers of Sodom;
You people of Gomorrah.

That linking of passages together with key words is something to keep your eye on in Isaiah. The key words might simply provide an artistic link between two passages or, as in this case, the linking words might suggest that we are still on the same topic. As we move into verse 10, we ought to be asking, what is Isaiah going to add in this next passage - you know, he is still talking about Sodom and Gomorrah - what is he going to add to the description of Judah he has already provided?

Approach to biblical poetry #3: Analyze the movement in the verses.

Our first approach was simply observation, using your imagination, looking for repetition and contrast. The second approach is more analytical, following the text and identifying the flow of thought. The third approach analyzes the movement present within each verse. In the previous two approaches, we looked at the passages as a whole. Now we are focusing in more closely on the words and phrases of the poet.

A Standard Model of Parallelism

The defining organizational feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. A typical verse of Hebrew poetry is divided into two phrases or versets. And verses are typically paired in a couplet. Sometimes there is a third verset to a verse. Sometimes there is a grouping of three verses, making a triplet instead of a couplet. But most often it's two verses with two phrases of versets each.

I am using the word, verse, here in the poetic sense which does not line up exactly with the verse numbers in your Bible. You will often find more than one line of Biblical verse in each verse of Scripture. The language gets a little confusing. Take the second verse of Isaiah as an example.

² Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth;
"Sons I have reared and brought up,
For the LORD speaks,
But they have revolted against Me.

We would say that is chapter 1, verse 2. That is the language of numbering in the Bible. But from the point of view of poetry, chapter 1, verse 2 contains two verses, or lines, each of which have two phrases, or versets. I will speak of the poetic verse as 2a and 2b. 2a is one verse with two phrases, "Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth." That is the first phrase. "For the LORD speaks." That is the second phrase. The second verse of poetry is in 2b. It is also composed of two versets. "Sons I have reared and brought up." That's the first verset. "But they have revolted against Me." That's the second verset. Together, the two verses in 2a and 2b make up a couplet. Chapter 1, verse 2 in Isaiah is a couplet. There are two lines of poetry in Isaiah 1:2.

In Bibles that show you the verse arrangements, the versets are ordered vertically. You read them down the column of your Bible one verse after the other. So, it's not so clear where the lines are. For my own study I prefer to view the versets horizontally or put them side by side. That helps me see the parallelism the poet is using in the verse. That is how the verses will be arranged in the transcripts of our Isaiah study. So, if you'd like to see how that is done, you can download the transcripts at observetheword.com.

Repetition is not merely repetition, not in the hands of the poet. Isaiah builds up a heavy indictment. We feel the weight of Judah's sin and the finality of their rebellion.

The basic idea for us in this principle of intensification is the recognition that similar phrases in Hebrew poetry are not merely ways to restate the text. There is usually some development from phrase to phrase. And that movement is developed in a myriad of ways. Sometimes the verset moves from a more general statement to a more specific one. Sometimes the verset moves in the other direction, from specific to general. Sometimes we are moving from more abstract to more concrete, sometimes from concrete to abstract. Sometimes we are moving from less striking language to more striking language. When observing at the level of verse and verset, pay attention to what the change between words and phrases implies, or might imply.

Conclusion

Okay, I am ready to conclude. So, what have we said? Regarding our method, we have considered three approaches to the study of Biblical poetry. You can take these approaches separately or you can combine all three in your study. You can simply read and make your own observations of what stands out or what seems striking to you, observing both with your mind and imagination. That is a great start. You can also try to follow the logical flow of the whole passage. What are the main ideas from one set of verses to another and from one passage to another? You can also focus in closely on the phrases or versets, looking for the movement within a verse, or just from one verse to another.

I will not focus through this series on our method of studying Biblical poetry, not after this lesson. This was an introduction. But I will be using all three methods in my own study. So, you will recognize examples as we go through the text.

Okay, what have we said about the text? Where are we? Isaiah has begun with a denouncement of Judah as rebellious sons who have turned away from the Holy One of Israel. He uses the term, "Israel," but he is talking to the people of the Southern Kingdom: to Judah. They do not know their God. Isaiah declares that they would be like Sodom and Gomorrah if God had not left a remnant. How is Judah like Sodom and Gomorrah? What is really going on, Isaiah? Well, Isaiah has more to say about that in this chapter. So, we will pick that up in our next lesson. He has also inserted a tiny bit of hope. There will be survivors.

Reflection questions

1. Read Isaiah 1:2-9. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Observe the way Isaiah 1:2-9 is formatted at the beginning of this lesson. Notice how the two phrases (versets) are set side by side on each line (verse). Notice how there are usually two lines of poetry grouped together with a similar idea or image as with 2a and b and 3a and b. Notice also the exception to the rule in verse 4. There are three lines instead of two and the third line has three phrases. Notice how the third phrase in 4c is centered under the first two phrases.
3. Compare how the text is formatted here to how the text is formatted in your Bible. Could you take the text in your Bible and format on your own like you see it in this lesson with phrases set side by side?
4. Take a couple lines of text and reflect on how the 2nd phrase slightly moves the thought forward. Notice also the 3rd phrase in 4c and 6b, how does that additional phrase provide emphasis or finality?
5. Choose one image in Isaiah 1:2-9. Imagine what it might look like. What picture is the poet drawing in your mind? How does Isaiah connect that image you just imagine to a more concrete reality?
6. Choose a second image. Take a couple of minutes to picture that image. What is Isaiah saying with that image? What is the concrete reality he is symbolizing?
7. Follow the flow of the passage. Consider first the state of Judah's relationship with the Father. How is that described? What behavior follows from Judah's relationship with God? What have been the consequences of that behavior? What is the envisioned future consequence?

Lesson 3 Isaiah 1:10-31 Covenant Lawsuit Prophecy

Introduction

Alec Motyer titles Isaiah 1-5, *"The Preface. Judah: diagnosis and prognosis."* He picks up on the image from our last lesson of the man so damaged in his rebellion that his body is covered from the sole of his foot to his head with bruises, welts and raw wounds. Those wounds are not cared for, not bandaged, not softened with oil. Why is the nation of Judah so sick and faint? Through his first five chapters Isaiah provides a diagnosis, explaining the spiritual disease of Judean society. Isaiah also provides prognosis. That is where the disease will take each person if left untreated.

Verse 1 gave us a historical reference of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The vision of Isaiah took place during the reigns of those kings. That reference is for whole book of Isaiah. We will not get another specific historical reference until chapter 6, verse 1. In the year of Uzziah's death, Isaiah responds to God's call to ministry. It is probably right to view these first five chapters as describing the societal situation of Judah concurrent with that vision in chapter 6, or even a little after that vision. That's why we are calling this, the preface. These chapters set up the state of Judean society at the beginning of Isaiah's ministry, as described in this book.

Chapter 1 consists of three poetic passages. We covered the first in our last lesson. Judah was described as a rebellious child that does not know God. That child despised his father and showed it in his behavior, becoming as unlike his Holy Father as possible, wicked and corrupt. That's prognosis, a description of the state of Judah. We were also told that, in spite of Judah's beaten-up state, things would get worse. The land would get overrun and Jerusalem besieged. That's prognosis. That's where this spiritual disease is headed.

Isaiah continues in the next two passages of chapter 1, addressing the religious and social sickness of Judah. We receive the religious diagnosis in verses 10-20 and the social diagnosis in 21-31.

Diagnosis of Jewish Religion in Isaiah's Time (1:10-20)

First, the middle passage of the chapter. Isaiah 1:10-20.¹

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 10 | Hear the word of the Lord,
Give ear to the instruction of our God, | You rulers of Sodom;
You people of Gomorrah. |
| 11 | "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?"
"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. | Says the Lord.
And the fat of fed cattle; |
| 12 | "When you come to appear before Me, | Who requires of you this trampling of My courts? |
| 13 | "Bring your worthless offerings no longer,
New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies— | Incense is an abomination to Me.
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. |
| 14 | "I hate your new moon festivals
and your appointed feasts,
I am weary of bearing them. | They have become a burden to Me; |
| 15 | "So when you spread out your hands in prayer,
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
Your hands are covered with blood. | I will hide My eyes from you;
I will not listen. |
| 16 | "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Cease to do evil,
Seek justice,
Defend the orphan, | Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
17 Learn to do good;
Reprove the ruthless,
Plead for the widow. |
| 18 | "Come now, and let us reason together,"
"Though your sins are as scarlet,
Though they are red like crimson, | Says the Lord,
They will be as white as snow;
They will be like wool. |

¹ See the appendix for notes on how the formatting for the verses is determined and why formatting the phrases side-by-side is helpful for study (though not as easy for reading).

God's Willingness to Cleanse

Moving on to verse 18, we enter into the second sub-section of the passage indicated by a repetition of the phrase, "Says the Lord." We have heard God's rejection of the perverted national religion practiced by Judah that assumed cleanliness could be obtained by ceremonial ritual, without any attempt at trying to love one's neighbor. This second sub-section begins,

¹⁸ "Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord,

It's our second "says the Lord". The Lord has something else to say about the matter. He does not leave it with the admonition to wash yourself clean. That is a beginning. The desire and attempt to live in line with the moral character of God is an expression of faith. It is a beginning. But we must reason together with God. We know or will soon realize that we cannot satisfy God's holy standard on our own. We do need a way to be cleansed. God is willing to do it.

Though your sins are as scarlet,	They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,	They will be like wool.

These words continue in the imagery of sacrifice. Isaiah reminds me of my brother Bill. He knows his colors. He uses three words to suggest blood: scarlet, red, and crimson. White as snow, like wool, connects us to the wool of a lamb. So, at the same time that we are reminded of the blood of sacrifice we also remember the blood on the hands of the worshiper: the stain of sin. When the throat of a lamb is cut, the red seeps into the wool. God says He will make it white again. We might picture standing in a woolen robe ruined by the stain of blood, somehow perfectly cleansed to a state of gleaming white wool.

This sounds like atoning grace, somebody taking our place apart from our own works. And we would not be wrong to read that into this declaration of cleansing. We don't have to wait for a New Testament theology in order to understand substitutional atonement. Isaiah would have understood substitutionary atonement from Moses, but he doesn't develop that line of thinking here. He declares God's willingness to cleanse, but he keeps his focus on the moral obligation required of a people claiming Covenant fellowship with God.

¹⁹ "If you consent and obey,	You will eat the best of the land;
²⁰ "But if you refuse and rebel,	You will be devoured by the sword."

Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The Role of the Covenant Lawsuit Prophet

We began with a call to "Hear the word of the Lord." We end with "Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Here at the end, Isaiah has communicated using a Covenant blessing and curse formula. Obedience brings blessing. Rebellion - curse. I will read it again.

¹⁹ "If you consent and obey,	You will eat the best of the land; (blessing)
²⁰ "But if you refuse and rebel,	You will be devoured by the sword." (curse)

It would be easy to take that as a basic statement of legalistic religion. If you do good, you are accepted. If you do bad, you are rejected. But that simple theological view, while in line with Job's friends, fails to capture Old Testament theology. For starters, we have to put Isaiah's words into a correct Covenant context. Even though Isaiah does not use the word "Covenant" here, he is using the language of Covenant.

I deal with Near-Eastern covenant extensively in my podcast on Interpreting the Pentateuch. I'll keep it very basic here just to clarify Isaiah's language and to set up an issue for us to look for later on in the book. Near-Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties at the time of Moses contained seven standard elements. A suzerain is a king of kings. A vassal is a lesser king that has sworn allegiance to a king of kings. God is King of kings over all peoples. Israel is a special vassal people among whom He has built His Temple and He has given them His law, which is His Covenant with them. The seven standard elements of our Near-Eastern covenant can be seen in Deuteronomy, which was a renewal of Covenant that God made with the second generation out of Egypt.

- (1) The 1st element of a 2nd millennium suzerain-vasal treaty is the Title – such as, “I am the Yahweh your God” in Deuteronomy 5:6a.
- (2) The 2nd element is the Historical Prologue – such as the very short, “who brought you up out of Egypt,” also in Deuteronomy 5:6b or the longer historical recap of Deuteronomy 1-3.
- (3) The 3rd element is the Stipulations, including
 - (a) basic stipulations – such as the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5:7-21.
 - (b) and detailed stipulations – such as the long list of laws in Deuteronomy 12-26.
- (4) The 4th element is the Deposition and regular reading – that is the placing of the Law in the Temple and the command to read that Law regularly, found in Deuteronomy 31:9-11.
- (5) The 5th element is Witnesses – such as the call to Heaven and Earth in Deuteronomy 30:19.
- (6) The 6th element is Blessings – such as those listed in Deuteronomy 28.
- (7) And the 7th element is Curses – such as those listed in Deuteronomy 27.

In verse 2 if you remember, Isaiah called Heaven and Earth as witnesses to his condemnation of Judah. I read last week the corresponding example of Witnesses in Deuteronomy 30:19. I’ll read it again, since it also includes language of blessing and curse, like we have here in verse 20.

Deuteronomy 30:19,

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

That language of blessing and curse is what we have just read in Isaiah 1:20.

¹⁹ “If you consent and obey,

You will eat the best of the land;

²⁰ “But if you refuse and rebel,

You will be devoured by the sword.”

So, we are putting that into Covenant context. There is an agreement made, a Covenant entered into with the King of kings, and if you are faithful to the King with whom you have entered into Covenant, you will receive blessing, good consequences. If you are unfaithful to your King, you can expect curses, bad consequences.

Now, there are two natural questions that must be asked regarding the Covenant. The first question is, “What is the basis for my relationship with my King? Is it my bloodline? Is it my great behavior? Is it my wisdom? What is the basis that allows me to enter into and stay in relationship with my King?” The second question is, “How should I live once I’m in Covenant relationship with my King?” We are going to find, especially this first question has a very different answer in Biblical Covenant than it did in ancient Near-Eastern covenant. That is because our King is holy. Our God is holy, and He demands holiness as a requirement for relationship. That is something that we cannot attain. God must accomplish it for us.

That is why God walked through the pieces of Covenant sacrifice in Genesis 15. It is why God provided the Passover lamb in Exodus 12. It’s why God established the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. It’s why He raised up the bronze serpent in Numbers 21. It’s why He promised restoration after exile in Deuteronomy 31. God foreshadowed, through ritual ceremony, that He was going to handle our sin problem. Somehow, in the future He had an answer. That is why the Old Covenant answers the first questions of Covenant in exactly the same way the New Covenant answers that question. What is the basis for relationship with a holy God? 0% works you do, and 100% the grace God gives. You can only receive it by faith. If it’s based on your works at all, you will fail.

Now, the Old and New Covenants do not answer the second question the same way. That question, “How then shall we live?” is defined by the Covenant you are under. There is overlap between the Old and New but there are also major differences. So, we have to keep that in mind when we’re reading Isaiah. The people of Judah were bound to live according to the Covenant they were in with God, and we are bound to live according to a different covenant: the New Covenant. So that’s how we answer, “how shall we live?” but the foundation, the basis for Covenant relationship, the first question is, “by grace through faith.” That is no different for us and them.

So, what is Isaiah doing by invoking the language of blessing and curse?

Isaiah is performing the role of Covenant lawsuit prophet. He is not a covenant mediator prophet. There are not many of those. That would be like Abraham, Moses, Jesus. Isaiah is not establishing a new covenant for the people of God. He is applying the Covenant that exists, the Mosaic Covenant, to Judah. He finds Judah in rebellion against that Covenant. He declares their guilt, and he calls them to repentance. That is the role of a covenant lawsuit prophet. Assessing the behavior of Judah, he declares to them to have violated the Covenant. In a sense, he is bringing a lawsuit against the nation. And he is declaring the ongoing consequence of disobedience - curse, and the consequences of repentance and obedience - blessing.

There are moral consequences to how we live out the Covenant. Now, there are two things for us to be on the lookout for in Isaiah. First, does he develop more the idea of salvation by grace through faith? Will Isaiah make clear a distinction between the two questions of Covenant, between the basis for Judah's relationship with God and the commands that Judah ought to follow? He has not made that distinction, not yet. We get just a taste of that. He promised to cleanse, to remove the stain of sin. But how? What does that look like? We don't have much here yet. So, we're going to wait to see does Isaiah develop those concepts in his book.

We also need to watch out for language that distinguishes between the faithful of Judah and the rebellious of Judah. In one sense, all Jews are God's promised people, Israel. That designation applies to everyone born into one of the twelve tribes, every daughter or son of Jacob. But it is also true that most of the Jews through most of Old Testament history are depicted as rebellious and faithless. There is a smaller group, a spiritual Israel within the nation of Israel that is called, a remnant. These do not keep the Law perfectly. But they have truly believed in Yahweh, are trusting Him for salvation, and seek to live for Him. So, it's going to make a difference for us in how we understand the curses that are declared by Isaiah, or the judgment. Does this apply to the whole nation of Israel? And if so, what of the believing remnant inside of Israel? Does the curse apply the same to those who believe and those who don't believe?

We will see an example in our second passage, so let's move on to 1:21-31.

Diagnosis of Jewish Society in Isaiah's Time (1:21-31)

In our first passage, Isaiah described God's perspective on hypocritical worship in His Temple. This passage repeats the charges of that passage, but it focuses not on the Temple: it focuses on the city Jerusalem. This is Isaiah 1:21-31.

21	How the faithful city has become a harlot, Righteousness once lodged in her,	She who was full of justice! But now murderers.
22	Your silver has become dross,	Your drink diluted with water.
23	Your rulers are rebels Everyone loves a bribe They do not defend the orphan,	And companions of thieves; And chases after rewards. Nor does the widow's plea come before them.
24	Therefore the Lord God of hosts, "Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries	The Mighty One of Israel, declares, And avenge Myself on My foes.
25	"I will also turn My hand against you, And will remove all your alloy.	And will smelt away your dross as with lye
26	"Then I will restore your judges as at the first, After that you will be called the city of righteousness,	And your counselors as at the beginning; A faithful city."
27	Zion will be redeemed with justice	And her repentant ones with righteousness.
28	But transgressors and sinners will be crushed together,	And those who forsake the Lord will come to an end.
29	Surely you will be ashamed of the oaks which you have desired,	And you will be embarrassed at the gardens which you have chosen.

The military language of “Lord God of hosts” and “Mighty One of Israel” rightly applies in the Jewish mind towards God’s avenging wrath against foe and adversary. Isaiah declares that this same wrath will be turned against Jerusalem. Just as God turns away from the hypocritical worshipers of our previous passage, He will also remove Covenant protection from His capital city. They will feel the wrath of God in the same way as wicked, pagan enemies like Sodom and Gomorrah, already referred to, but actually not exactly like Sodom and Gomorrah. There is a difference here. And this is interesting. God’s fire destroyed both of those cities. There was no coming back from that. The fire of wrath described here has a purifying element. When God turns His hand against Jerusalem, it will be like precious metal heated up. The dross will be burned away, and the precious alloy removed for use.

So we get this word of future hope after this purification in verse 26.

²⁶ “Then I will restore your judges as at the first, And your counselors as at the beginning;
After that you will be called the city A faithful city.”
of righteousness,

God’s purifying fire will restore Jerusalem back to what she had once been. Maybe we are to imagine Jerusalem during the best of David’s reign, a place of just judges and wise counselors, a righteous and faithful city. The language has been emphasizing a breakdown at the top. The judgment covers all levels of society. But there was a special mention of rebellious rulers. And this restoration depicts a new kind of judges and counselors that lead the city in righteousness and faithfulness. The need for righteous leadership is a theme of Isaiah. It does not discount the responsibility of every individual, but it does suggest this need we have, or the need that society has, for good, just, wise leadership.

Isaiah develops the idea of purifying or redemptive wrath in the final sub-section of the chapter, verses 27-31. This is where we first notice two kinds of people in Judean society. And there is a difference between a repentant remnant and a rebellious majority.

²⁷ Zion will be redeemed with justice And her repentant ones with righteousness.
²⁸ But transgressors and sinners will be And those who forsake the Lord will come
crushed together, to an end.

The just punishment to come will result in the redemption of Zion and then the repentant ones in Zion. Zion is another word for Jerusalem. That is the minority remnant. The punishment will not be redemptive for those who persist in rebellion. They will be crushed. They will come to an end. That is the language Isaiah uses for them. So, the curse, the punishment that is coming on Jerusalem has a different effect depending on whether we are talking about the remnant or the majority, and we have to keep that in mind as we go through Isaiah. Isaiah continues his prognosis speaking of the rebellious majority. These are the final three verses of the chapter.

²⁹ Surely you will be ashamed of the oaks And you will be embarrassed at the
which you have desired, gardens which you have chosen.
³⁰ For you will be like an oak whose leaf fades away Or as a garden that has no water.
³¹ The strong man will become tinder, His work also a spark.
Thus they shall both burn together And there will be none to quench them.

The reference to oaks and gardens is a reference to places of pagan Canaanite worship. These trees and these special gardens, that is where you go to worship Baal and Asherah, the pagan gods and goddesses. This is the harlotry that was referred to in verse 21. Jerusalem has become like a harlot because of her people. The majority have gone away to these other gods. There are always spiritual options in society. There are always sources apart from God where people go to seek out significance, or control, or pleasure. All other religions, all substitute spirituality, all idols of the heart ultimately fail to provide true life and abundance. The oaks and the gardens that these people chose over Yahweh are going to leave them ashamed and embarrassed. A people that has put their faith in false sources of significance and false sources of life: Jerusalem will look like an oak in the winter

whose leaf has faded away, like a garden mirage in the desert that actually has no water. The desires of the heart cannot be filled apart from God. We cannot be the captain of our own souls. Final verse,

³¹ The strong man will become tinder, His work also a spark.
Thus they shall both burn together And there will be none to quench them.

That is the closing of this chapter. That is also the closing of the book. The end of chapter 1 is foreshadowing the end of chapter 66. Isaiah's diagnosis of Judah sets us up to understand the times in which Isaiah ministered. It also provides a mirror by which we might assess our own churches, our own national religions, and our own societies.

Reflection questions

1. Read Isaiah 1:10-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Follow the flow of thought in Isaiah 1:10-20. Use the layout in this lesson to read the text slowly, phrase by phrase. Notice the movement from phrase to phrase. Which three or four lines especially stand out to you in the effect Isaiah creates by his movement from one phrase to the other?
3. Summarize the flow of thought in 1:10-20 using your own words. Try to limit yourself to only 4-6 ideas. What is the first main idea or thought? What is the second? Third? Fourth? And so on to the end.
4. Choose one image in Isaiah 1:21-31. Imagine what it might look like. What picture is the poet drawing in your mind? How does Isaiah connect that image you just imagine to a more concrete reality?
6. Choose a second image in 1:21-31. Take a couple of minutes to picture that image. What is Isaiah saying with that image? What is the concrete reality he is symbolizing?
7. What is a truth here that you see relating to your own culture in some way?
8. What is a truth here that you see relating to your own life in some way?

Appendix: Why and How are the Poetic Phrases Formatted on the Same Line?

Why Format Phrases Side-By-Side?

Bibles format poetic verse vertically, sometimes with just one column of text on a page and sometimes with two columns of text on a page. You read down the column phrase by phrase (verset by verset). This is more natural to the eye than the layout I am using in my preparation and transcription of the lessons.

I picked up the practice of setting phrases side-by-side on a horizontal line from Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. I now find it a more helpful way to study the text. Reading the poetry vertically, it is not immediately apparent which phrases go together to form one line. You especially do not see if there is a third phrase in the line. And even when you do see the two phrases, your mind is not encouraged to compare the two phrases carefully as you need to do when studying the detail of Hebrew poetry.

In the third way of reading Hebrew poetry that I recommended in the previous lesson, I gave a brief summary of two principles from Alter. Those were the principles of incremental repetition and intensification. To apply those two principles in your study, you need to see which phrases are paired in a verse.

Alter recognizes five types of relationship between parallel phrases. If you would like to see an example, I included one at the end of the article *The Study of Biblical Poetry*.

So, why line up the phrases side-by-side even though it is harder to read the text that way? It may be harder to read at first, but it helps you to study the text by making clear to your mind the poet's phrase by phrase structure of each line. (And by making clear when you have a third phrase, that tends to add emphasis or conclusion to a thought.)

How Do We Determine the Phrases in a Line?

How have I determined which phrases make up one line of poetry and when there are three instead of two?

For chapter 1, I did the formatting of the text myself, taking hints from the format in my NASB version of the Bible. As I was formatting the text of Isaiah 2 for the next lesson, I was reminded how difficult it can be sometimes to identify where a new line starts and how many phrases or versets are in that line. The bottom-line answer is that I have turned for help to Robert Alter's *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019). Alter is a professor of literature at Stanford University. His ethnicity is Jewish. He is not a Christian and does not hold to the infallibility of Scripture as God's inspired Word. He does love the Bible. And he is an expert on both the Hebrew language and poetry. I am also using John Oswalt's NICOT commentaries on Isaiah to check the formatting.

The formatting in most Bible's is helpful, but still leaves open some questions. I wanted consistent help from some experts for this study.

Different Bible versions format the poetic structure differently. For example, some versions will capitalize the first word of each phrase or verset. That is what I see in both my NASB translation and in my Croatian Kršćanska Sadašnost translation, though not in my ESV or NIV translations, which keep to the more grammatically correct practice of only capitalizing at the beginning of a sentence. (I say "my translation" because I do not know if different printings of NASB or ESV use different formatting.) Here is an example.

Another more helpful way to see the phrases is to understand how your Bible indents. My NASB only has two levels of indentation for poetic verse. Each phrase or verset is lined up on the left but when that phrase runs over to the next line in the text, it is indented. All the indentation in my NASB is showing that the text is still one phrase. This helps me see the phrases but does not help me pair the phrases together in one line.

1:11 “What are your multiplied
sacrifices to Me?”
Says the Lord.
“I have had enough of burnt
offerings of rams
And the fat of fed cattle;
And I take no pleasure in the
blood of bulls, lambs or goats.

The intention is only showing you that the phrase is too long for the column. The full first phrase is “What are your multiplied sacrifices to me?” Every phrase is lined up on the left, starting with a capital letter. Notice that there are five phrases. Either one of these phrases pairs with a phrase in verse 10 or verse 11 or you have a line of three phrases. Which is it? Can you tell? You can look in the format of this lesson to see what I think.

In my ESV every phrase or verset belonging to the same line is indented. The first phrase of a line will be lined up on the left. And the second phrase will be indented under that first phrase, making it easy to see the grouping of two phrases. If there are three phrases to the line, the first phrase is lined up on the left but both the second and third phrase are indented. If one of the phrases runs too long then it is indented even further over, so that you know the text belongs to that same phrase. This is a very helpful way of formatting the text to see the phrases. I do not know if all ESV printings do this the same way.

I did notice in providing this example that my ESV have six phrases in Isaiah 1:11. That is another issue. The Hebrew manuscripts do not show the division of phrases either. Sometimes scholars disagree with one another over the right division. So, the ESV breaks the last phrase in verse 11 into two phrases, so that we have three lines of text with two phrases each.

1:11 “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?”
says the Lord;
“I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

Notice how the second phrase of a line is indented under the first phrase. Also notice how each phrase is not capitalized as in the NASB. Verse 15 provides an example of a three-phrase line formatted in the ESV.

15 “When you spread out your hands,
I will hide My eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Setting the phrases side-by-side yourself and trying to see the way the poet is moves from one to the other is a helpful skill in the study of Hebrew poetry. You can often do this on your own. When you are looking at “An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master’s manger” the parallelism of the two phrases is apparent. You know you have one verse with two versets. And if you want to format that line out for personal study, you know to place those two versets side by side.

But sometimes we need help from scholars to identify the phrases and to determine how those phrases line up in the structure of the poetry. Sometimes the scholars are not sure. And that’s okay. We still get the main idea. Most often there is agreement and the scholars are helping us see something true to the poet’s intended communication.

Lesson 4 Isaiah 2-4 Sin and Election

Introduction

Isaiah		
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."		
Book of the King 1-39	Book of the Servant 40-55	Book of the Anointed Conqueror 56-66

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).
*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

In this lesson I am zooming out to cover three chapters at once. That's part of the method we will use as we study Isaiah. We are not going to zoom in on every passage. Isaiah is a long prophecy and I want to keep us moving.

Speaking of zooming out, let's back all the way out to look at the whole book and then zoom in to the three chapters of this lesson. Isaiah has 66 chapters. That's our top level. The standard way to view Isaiah recognizes three major divisions. To stay consistent, I'll be using Alec Motyer's titles throughout. Motyer titles 1-39, *The Book of the King*; 40-55, *The Book of the Servant*; and 56-66, *The Book of the Anointed Conqueror*. Motyer actually sees the bridge chapters of 38-39 as the preface to the second book. And the only major change I am making to his structure is keeping chapters 38-39 as the end of the first book. That's the division you will see most everywhere. So, our first level includes three divisions: 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66: *The Book of the King*, *The Book of the Servant*, and *The Book of the Anointed Conqueror*.

We are in the first book, *The Book of the King*. This book breaks down into five sections. It's helpful to think of these five sections in a chiasmic arrangement, where the outer two sections parallel one another, the inner sections parallel one another, and then we have one section in the middle.

Isaiah				
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."				
Book of the King 1-39				
Preface: Diagnosis and Prognosis 1-5	The Triumph of Grace 6-12	The Universal Kingdom 13-27	The Lord of History 28-37	Bridge: Hezekiah's Fateful Choice 38-39

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).
*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

At the beginning and end we have a preface and a conclusion. We are focused on the preface now. The first five chapters, *Diagnosis and Prognosis*. At the end, *Hezekiah's Fateful Choice* in 38 and 29 provides a bridge that concludes *The Book of the King* and introduces *The Book of the Servant*. The inner frames each emphasize a king of Judah. In *The Triumph of Grace*, chapters 6-12, Isaiah gives us a story about King Ahaz. In *The Lord of History*, chapters 28-37, Isaiah gives us a story about King Hezekiah. Motyer's title for the central section is *The Universal Kingdom*. That's chapters 13-27, where the prophecies turn outward from Israel to address the major and minor players on the international stage around Judah.

Kingship is a major theme for this book. Thus, the name, *The Book of the King*. We will see failure from both a wicked king and a good king. Both are sons of David. Both are lacking. We will also see a yearning for a king who could bear the weight of righteous government on his shoulders. In answer to that yearning for righteous leadership, we get prophecies of hope that one day a truly faithful son of David will sit on the throne.

That's *The Book of the King* in five sections. We need to continue zooming in to look more closely just at the first of those five sections, which we have titled, *Preface: Diagnosis and Prognosis*. And this first section breaks down further into three subsections. Motyer titles these, *Sin and Experience*, *Sin and Election*, and, *Sin and Grace*. We have already addressed *Sin and Experience*. That was chapter 1, where Isaiah diagnosed the sin of Judah in three passages, commenting first on the national situation

of Judah as a child which has rejected its father, then considering the religious state of Judah as a people whose worship God detests, and ending with a diagnosis of the social situation, describing the once faithful city of Jerusalem as faithless and corrupt.

From all three perspectives, national, religious, and social, the diagnosis was dire. Isaiah accompanied the diagnosis with a prognosis of destruction. The first remedy he recommended was to turn from evil and do good. He also alluded to the need for God to provide cleansing from sin. But he did not explain how that is possible. His focus was on the moral responsibility of Judah. Jerusalem had been a faithful city. And she will again be a faithful city. But she is not now a faithful city.

1:4c They have abandoned the LORD, They have despised the Holy One of Israel,
They have turned away from Him.

Isaiah		
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."		
Book of the King 1-39		
Preface: Diagnosis and Prognosis 1-5		
Sin and Experience 1 Title (1) The National Situation (2-9) The Religious Situation (10-20) The Social Situation (21-26) Tensions Between Threat and Hope Resolved (27-31)	Sin and Election 2-4 Superscription (1) The Ideal Jerusalem (2:2-4) The Actual Jerusalem (2:5-4:1) The Future Jerusalem (4:2-6)	Sin and Grace 5 The Vineyard: A Total Work; A Total Loss (1-7) The 'Stink-fruit': The Crop Produced, The Harvest to Come (8-30)

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

We are now moving into the second sub-section of the preface, chapters 2-4. Here Isaiah develops the idea of Jerusalem further. Israel was chosen by God. Jerusalem is His chosen capital. He placed His Temple in the heart of the city. But the people have turned away from God to walk in sin. What do we do with this reality of sin and election? Sin and being chosen? That's the theme of this section. How do we understand God's responsibility toward a people He has called His own when those people walk away from Him? Will there be consequences? Will the promises of provision and protection still stand?

Isaiah gives us three passages in this section which we Motyer calls, the ideal Jerusalem, the actual Jerusalem, and the future Jerusalem. First, we consider the ideal Jerusalem in 2:2-4, then the actual Jerusalem in 2:5-4:1, and finally the future Jerusalem in 4:2-6. Though our first poem is brief, just 3 Bible verses, it is an important development of thought in Isaiah. So, I will spend a little more time on this ideal Jerusalem. We begin with the superscription in 2:1 and then have the poetic passage in 2:2-4.

The Ideal Jerusalem (2:1-4)

- 1 The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
- 2 Now it will come about that in the last days
Will be established as the chief of the mountains,
And all the nations will stream to it.
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
That He may teach us concerning His ways
For the law will go forth from Zion
- 4 And He will judge between the nations,
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation,
And never again will they learn war.

This is the ideal Jerusalem. This is what the city of the people of God would look like in an ideal world. The superscription in verse 1 is the only superscription in the book apart from the one that

² Alter's translation has three phrases here on one line. I left the four phrases of the couplet as in the NASB.

appears in the very first verse of the book. Here it reads, “The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.”

A lot of scholars have debated why this superscription appears here but nowhere else in Isaiah. We do not know how much of the text the superscription alludes to. It could apply to all of Isaiah, but 1:1 already does that. So, this would seemingly apply to a shorter section. Some scholars think it applies to the immediate text of 2-4 and maybe also chapter 5. And they think these prophecies were delivered in some other form earlier in Isaiah’s ministry before being included in this larger life’s work.

An interesting bit of support for that idea is in Micah 4:1-3, which replicates almost exactly this description of Jerusalem in Isaiah 2:2-4. Scholars debate whether Isaiah wrote it and Micah copied it, or whether Micah wrote it and Isaiah copied it, or whether both copied it from a third source. The theory that Isaiah produced a smaller work, including all of 2-4 would explain both the superscription and would explain where Micah would have seen or heard the passage to include in his own work. In the end, we don’t know, but that’s a good possibility.

This passage definitely connects to last passage in chapter 1. There we encountered both faithfulness and faithlessness in Jerusalem, with an emphasis on faithlessness. These verses provide a positive contrast in their description of the ideal Jerusalem.

The first phrase of the poem tells us when this ideal will become a reality. “It will come about that in the last days” these things will be true. “The last days” is not a very specific timeframe in Jewish prophecy. The term shows up often. Isaiah’s listeners would not know how far off the last days were supposed to be, nor would they know how long the last days would last. We will have to pay attention to this phrase as we go to see what detail Isaiah will add. We will wait for Isaiah to tell us what will be included in the last days.

One of the things that will happen in these last days, whenever that will be, is that “the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains and will be raised above the hills.” Pagan religions often recognized a holy mountain as the seat of their god. Think of Mount Olympus. God Himself used the visually symbolic power of a mountain when He cut covenant with His people at Mount Sinai. And He also chose to establish His capital, Jerusalem, on a mountainous or hilly site. The Bible always speaks of going up to Jerusalem from whichever direction a person approaches. It is on a high place. The mountain of the house of the Lord is the hill in Jerusalem called, Mount Zion, on which the Temple stood.

The description of Jerusalem “established as the chief mountain and raised above the hills” emphasizes the primacy of God and His Temple over any other religious option. He is raised above all the others. God’s mountain is the true source of holiness and wisdom.

The mountain of the Lord will not be raised up only for the Jewish people to feel superior to their neighbors. And here is a special aspect of Isaiah’s Covenant understanding. The ideal Jerusalem is for Jews and non-Jews. The non-Jewish peoples will acknowledge God. “The nations will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, ‘Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.’”

“Many peoples” is not the same as “many people.” Many people can be thousands and thousands of Jews. Many peoples is like John’s language in Revelation, “a great multitude...from every nation an all tribes and peoples and tongues.” These peoples are not coming to recreate the tower of Babel. The nations are not coming together in Jerusalem to vote on a truth they all find agreeable. They are not coming together to promote their own ingenuity. They are not coming together to bring God down to earth. This is not the United Nations, and it is not the Olympics. These people are coming to the house of Jacob. That is God’s house. And there is only one truth taught at God’s house. And only one focus in God’s house.

Let me pause to say one thing about the reference to Jacob. Why call the Temple “the house of Jacob?” Isaiah mentions Jacob 42 times in his book. This is one of those terms used regularly through all three major divisions of Isaiah, like the name “Holy One of Israel.” We find it throughout. Jacob is usually used as a reference to the Covenant people Israel. Several times in this book Jacob and Israel occur parallel to one another in the two phrases of one line of poetry as synonyms.

I do wonder if Isaiah uses the term “Jacob” to make clear that we are talking about the Covenant people, since the word “Israel” had two different meanings at this time. Sometimes Israel means the Covenant people of God, God’s elect nation, all Jews. But sometimes Israel is a reference to the Northern Kingdom that split off from Judah after the death of Solomon. That Israel has its capital in Samaria and will be conquered by Assyrians in 722 BC during Isaiah’s lifetime. When we see Jacob alone or Jacob parallel to Israel, we know we are not talking about that northern nation. We are talking about all twelve tribes, the whole Covenant people.

Why do the peoples of the Earth say to one another, “Let us go up...to the house of the God of Jacob”? Why do they want to go up to the Temple of Yahweh? Isaiah tells us.

That He may teach us concerning His ways	And that we may walk in His paths.”
For the law will go forth from Zion	And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

Jerusalem here is pictured as a new kind of Mount Sinai. God gave His Law to the people Israel on that mountain. Now Mount Zion has become the source of God’s teaching. And we see that these peoples are not coming just to hear some interesting teaching and then make of it whatever they want. They are coming for instruction with an attitude of obedience, “that [they] may walk in His paths.”

God here is depicted as King of kings. “He will judge between the nations, and render decisions for many peoples.” The people come and will view themselves as faithful vassals, submitting to His judgments. And as the peoples turn to God as their rightful authority, a new era of peace ensues.

And they will hammer their swords into plowshares	And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation,	And never again will they learn war.

You see, because God has become their mediator, God is making judgment between them, and they are listening. They are obeying. This vision of an ideal Jerusalem belongs to the future. Judah is nowhere near this ideal. How is it even possible that sinful Judah arrives at this ideal future? The next passage shakes us back into the ugly present.

Actual Jerusalem (2:5-4:1)

First, we have an exhortation in verse 5. This exhortation could be seen as the last verse of the previous passage, since the motivation for the exhortation comes from considering the ideal Jerusalem. The exhortation can also be seen as the first verse of the next passage, since the need to exhort Judah comes from the current wayward state of the people. This is the exhortation. It is short.

The first exhortation (2:5)

⁵ Come, house of Jacob, and let us walk in the light of the LORD.

In the future other peoples will say, “Let us go up to... the house of the God of Jacob... that we may walk in His paths.” So, what do you have to say right now, house of Jacob? If future peoples will recognize the rightness of walking in God’s light, should not His chosen ones walk in the light of the Lord right now? Should not His chosen ones always choose to walk in the light of the Lord?

The actual Jerusalem: its religious condition (2:6-21)

As we have already seen in chapter 1, Judah is definitely not walking in the light of the Lord. And similar to chapter 1, we are going to consider their religious condition. That is the rest of our chapter 2, verses 6-21. And then we’re going to consider their social condition, 3:1-4:1.

We begin verse 6 with a statement of abandonment. In 1:4 it was Judah who abandoned God. Here it is the other way around. You do have to pay attention to the pronouns. Biblical poets don’t mind

Notice “in that day” again. It does not say “in the last days.” But in that day when God chooses to make the proud one tumble. Man will be humbled. God will be exalted. That is a certainty in the day God chooses.

As we go on, Isaiah creates striking imagery in verses 18-21. In that day, when proud Judah becomes surrounded and learns that all their vain systems of power avail no real protection, when a nation stronger, and hungrier, and more wicked than they comes knocking at their gates, what of their false idols then? What of the religion they had fashioned to justify their passions and vanities? Will that religion save? Will it protect? Verses 18-21.

<p>¹⁸ But the idols will completely vanish.</p> <p>¹⁹ <i>Men</i> will go into caves of the rocks Before the terror of the LORD</p> <p>²⁰ In that day men will cast away Which they made for themselves to worship,</p> <p>²¹ In order to go into the caverns of the rocks Before the terror of the LORD</p>	<p>And into holes of the ground And the splendor of His majesty, When He arises to make the earth tremble.</p> <p>Their idols of silver and their idols of gold, to the moles and the bats³ and the clefts of the cliffs and the splendor of His majesty, When He arises to make the earth tremble.</p>
---	--

“The idols will completely vanish.” How? “Men will go into caves and into holes of the ground.” Why? Because of the terror of the Lord. That terror of an invading army. As the people scramble in fear to find a hiding place, they take their valuable idols with them. These gods are having to be protected by man.

<p>²⁰ In that day men will cast away Which they made for themselves to worship,</p>	<p>Their idols of silver and their idols of gold, to the moles and the bats</p>
--	---

That imagery, it’s not just that they had to go in caves: they’re thrown to the moles and the bats. The ignominy, the shame on the idols. Talk about man being abased! The idols are abased and humbled, and they just get thrown in with the moles and bats. At the end of Isaiah’s critique of Judah’s false religion, these idols are thrown into darkness. And we remember the exhortation that preceded this section.

⁵ Come, house of Jacob, and let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Before shifting from the religious condition of Judah to the social condition of Judah, Isaiah exhorts the people again.

The second exhortation (2:22)

<p>²² Stop regarding man,</p>	<p>whose breath <i>of life</i> is in his nostrils; For why should he be esteemed?</p>
--	---

This exhortation pairs with the first. Walk with God. Do not regard man. It also precedes the social break down of Judah, a breakdown that focus particularly on leadership in society. “Stop regarding man” is quite appropriate to what is about to follow in 3:1-4:1.

The actual Jerusalem: its social condition (3:1-4:1)

The future ideal Jerusalem envisioned a true and wholesome society where the peoples practiced true God-honoring religion by seeking to hear from Him and obey Him. God was their King. They had true good leadership. Reconciliation and peace will follow. Instruments of war will be turned into instruments of agriculture.

True religion builds a wholesome society. Corrupt religion yields a corrupt society. We saw this in chapter 1. We see it again in 2 and 3. Chapter 2 has shown us the corrupt idolatry of Judah. They refuse to walk in the light of God. The breakdown now depicted in chapter 3 follows that rejection of God. The emphasis is on the collapse of leadership. God’s abandonment of Israel has social consequences. He had

³ I moved “to the moles and the bats” to the end, which follows the Hebrew order, maintaining a simple chiasm where A is the action of casting away, B and B’ are what was cast away and A’ is to whom they were cast.

promised to be a shield to Abraham. He is going to remove that shield from Jerusalem. He will remove their whole supply system, shutting off access to the basic necessities of bread and water. And He will remove their trained leadership from every sector of society. Listen to that removal in 3:1-3.

- ¹ For behold, the Lord GOD of hosts is going to remove from Jerusalem and Judah
Both supply and support, the whole supply of bread
And the whole supply of water;
- ² The mighty man and the warrior, The judge and the prophet, the diviner
and the elder,
- ³ The captain of fifty and the honorable man, The counselor and the expert artisan, and the
skillful enchanter.

The society has no substitute for leadership. The whole structure breaks down.

- ⁴ And I will make mere lads their princes, And capricious children will rule over them,
⁵ And the people will be oppressed, Each one by another, and each one by
his neighbor;
The youth will storm against the elder And the inferior against the honorable.
- ⁶ When a man lays hold of his brother in his father's house, *saying*,
"You have a cloak, you shall be our ruler, And these ruins will be under your charge,"
- ⁷ He will protest on that day, saying, "I will not be *your* healer,
For in my house there is neither bread nor cloak; You should not appoint me ruler of the people."

Isaiah follows the breakdown of leadership with a statement of judgment in 3:8-11.

- ⁸ For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen,
Because their speech and their actions are To rebel against His glorious presence.
against the LORD,
- ⁹ The expression of their faces bears witness And they display their sin like Sodom;
against them,
They do not *even* conceal it.
- Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves.
- ¹⁰ Say to the righteous that *it will go well with them*, For they will eat the fruit of their actions.
- ¹¹ Woe to the wicked! *It will go badly with him*, For what he deserves will be done to him.

Verses 12-15 then depict the leadership of Judah being indicted in the court of God.

- ¹² O My people! Their oppressors are children, And women rule over them.
O My people! Those who guide you lead *you* astray And confuse the direction of your paths.
- ¹³ The LORD arises to contend, And stands to judge the people.
¹⁴ The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people,
"It is you who have devoured the vineyard; The plunder of the poor is in your houses.
- ¹⁵ "What do you mean by crushing My people And grinding the face of the poor?"
Declares the Lord GOD of hosts.

In the last part of the passage Isaiah is not going to allow the women of Jerusalem to escape responsibility. Judging by the wealth implied in the description, he is about to give of makeup, and clothes, and jewelry. The women targeted here are those who enjoy the wealth and luxuriousness of a society that has ungratefully turned away from God. There is also the suggestion of sensuality that goes beyond humble beauty. Isaiah is speaking of women here who do not walk in the light of the Lord but embrace the values of a fallen society.

- ¹⁶ Moreover, the LORD said, "Because the daughters of Zion are proud
And walk with heads held high and seductive eyes,
And go along with mincing steps And tinkle the bangles on their feet,
- ¹⁷ Therefore the Lord will afflict the scalp of And the LORD will make their foreheads bare."
the daughters of Zion with scabs,

18 In that day the Lord will take away the beauty of *their* anklets and headbands,
19 the crescent ornaments and dangling earrings, bracelets, and veils,
20 headdresses, ankle chains, sashes, perfume boxes, amulets,
21 finger rings, nose rings, 22 festal robes, outer tunics, cloaks,
money purses,
23 hand mirrors, undergarments, turbans and veils.
24 Now it will come about that instead of
sweet perfume there will be putrefaction;
Instead of well-set hair, a plucked-out scalp; Instead of fine clothes, a donning of sackcloth;
And branding instead of beauty.
25 Your men will fall by the sword And your mighty ones in battle.
26 And her gates will lament and mourn, And deserted she will sit on the ground.
4:1 For seven women will take hold of one man in that day,⁴
saying, “We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes,
only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach!”

By calling the women pictured here “daughters of Zion,” Isaiah emphasizes the heritage they have walked away from. Don’t you know who you were meant to be? That you were meant to walk in the light? At the same time Isaiah is condemning Jerusalem. These are the kinds of daughters that this present Zion, this society, produces. They are not daughters of the ideal Zion. They are daughters of the present, worldly, fallen, rebellious Zion.

Future Jerusalem (4:2-6)

In 4:2-6, we look ahead again to Jerusalem’s future. This vision is not separate from ideal Jerusalem. We can view the whole section as a simple three-part chiasm. Ideal Jerusalem and future Jerusalem are parallel at beginning and end. Actual Jerusalem forms the center. But the description of future Jerusalem is not a mere repetition of ideal Jerusalem. The ideal had not yet addressed the question of apostasy among God’s elect people. It’s that question I asked at the beginning of this lesson: what happens when God’s chosen, elect people walk away from Him? Do all the promises still stand?

Jerusalem is the chosen city. The capital of the chosen people. What happens when the majority of that people turn away from God, both in their hearts and in their behavior? We see that they experience the consequence of their own sin, both in the present and in a future judgment. You know, in that day when an army comes to punish them. But what about the far distant future of Heaven? Will they still participate in the ideal Jerusalem when there is no more war? And the answer is “no.” God’s election of Israel does not mean that every Israelite will participate in the new Jerusalem. Paul recognized this theology in Isaiah. It’s the theology of Romans 9-11. In fact, Paul quotes Isaiah 1:9 in Romans 9:29, “Unless the LORD of hosts had left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah.” There are only a few survivors, not the majority.

This future image of Jerusalem assumes the ideal pictured in 2:2-4 while also limiting those Jews who will be present as a remnant in that ideal Jerusalem. Not only will many peoples stream into Jerusalem, but only a remnant of Jews will be there to participate in the new reality with them.

2 In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious,
and the fruit of the earth will be the pride and the adornment
of the survivors of Israel.
3 It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem
will be called holy— everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem.
4 When the Lord has washed away the filth of and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem
the daughters of Zion from her midst,
by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning,

⁴ Motyer, Oswalt and Alter all recognizes 4:1 as the end of this poem, starting the next passage at 4:2.

- ⁵ then the Lord will create over the whole area and over her assemblies
of Mount Zion
a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire
by night;
for over all the glory will be a canopy.
- ⁶ There will be a shelter to give shade from the heat by day,
and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain.⁵

There will be provision and protection. But only for the remnant. The first phrase begins with “in that day.” Four times here in chapter 2 and 3 “in that day” referred to the humbling Judah would receive at the hands of an avenging army. It gives an ominous start to this chapter. Reading on though, we realize that this day is equivalent to “the last days” of ideal Jerusalem. In that day when God restores Jerusalem. That’s a good day.

The text also connects back to the perverted beauty of the immoral daughters of Zion whose sweet perfume was exchanged for the smell of putrefaction. That kind of evocative imagery sets Isaiah apart as a poet. You can almost smell it, sweet perfume to putrefaction. Instead of putrefaction, here we see life. And instead of immoral daughters, we see the beauty and glory of the Lord’s branch.

The term “branch” refers to a branch on a family tree. In the prophets, “branch” almost always refers to the Messiah as a branch of the line of David. Here, it is the Branch of the Lord. If this is the same Branch, then the Messiah who will reign in future Jerusalem, will be of both the line of David and of the line of God. For now, we are not even sure we are talking about the Messiah, not yet. That is another trademark of Isaiah. He introduces themes and then waits to develop those themes later in the book. This is in fact a reference to Jesus, but that picture needs to become clear. It’s not clear yet, and we will get back to the branch in chapter 11.

The new Jerusalem is connected to the full manifestation of the Branch’s beauty and glory. At that time the fruit of the Earth will belong to the survivors of Israel. In the period of judgment, they had no bread or water. Society was completely broken down. Here they have plenty. Society is flourishing. It is their pride and adornment.

We also recognize a development of the remnant theme. There will be survivors. Those who remain in Jerusalem will be called “holy.” They are those who remain after the purifying fire of God’s wrath. Along with the Messiah and the remnant, God’s presence will be over Jerusalem as a cloud by day and fire by night, a clear reference back to the Exodus. Here, God’s presence is among them. And here, the 2nd section of the preface ends.

It is not always easy as Christians to self-identify with the extreme fallenness of Judah in this period. Its easier to apply this critique of false religion and corrupt society to our secular cultures. I hope our churches have not rejected the Lord and embraced the kind of idolatry and immorality pictured here. I do, however, find myself strongly identifying with Isaiah’s exhortations. What if we did this? What if we considered who we will one day be: a holy nation, made up of many peoples, living with God in our midst? What if we considered our future reality and tried our best to live that out today? We recognize one day Jesus will reign among us in the New Jerusalem. But He is reigning today from Heaven. And so, what if we received these exhortations and lived this out?

^{2:5a} Come, house of Jacob...

^{2:22} Stop regarding man, whose breath *of life* is in his nostrils;
For why should he be esteemed?

^{2:5b} ...let us walk in the light of the LORD.

⁵ My English Bibles all format this section as prose. But Robert Alter formats it as poetry, commenting, “the diction is manifestly poetic, and it is possible to scan it as poetry, even though it is somewhat looser metrically than other Prophetic poems.” I will read it as poetry following Alter’s formatting of the text.

Reflection questions

1. Read Isaiah 2:1-4. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
3. Choose one image in Isaiah 2:6-21. Imagine what it might look like. What picture is the poet drawing in your mind? How does Isaiah connect that image you just imagine to a more concrete reality?
4. Choose a second image in Isaiah 3:1-4:1. Imagine what it might look like. What picture is the poet drawing in your mind? How does Isaiah connect that image you just imagine to a more concrete reality?
5. Follow the flow of thought in Isaiah 2:5-4:1. What are one or two themes that especially stand out to you? How does the movement from phrase to phrase help emphasize that theme?
6. Consider the effect of the exhortation in 2:5 when you read it only with the image of ideal Jerusalem in 2:1-4. Then consider the effect of the exhortation in 2:5 when you read it with 2:6 and following. How does that exhortation feel different from those two different perspectives?
6. Read Isaiah 4:2-6. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
7. What truths or ideas are added in the depiction of future Jerusalem in 4:2-6 that are not included in the depiction of ideal Jerusalem in 2:1-4? How do those additional truths relate to or flow from the depiction of actual Jerusalem in 2:5-4:1?
8. In light of Isaiah's depictions of ideal, actual and future Jerusalem, how do you understand the relationship between the election of Israel and individual salvation for Israelites? Does the sin of Judah disrupt God's plan in choosing Israel as his people?
9. What would it look like for you personally to put into practice the exhortation in 2:5 and 2:22?

Lesson 5 Isaiah 5 Sin and Grace

Introduction

We are in the prologue, the first section of the first book of Isaiah. This is Diagnosis and Prognosis. Isaiah gives us a diagnosis of Judah's spiritual state. It's not good. He also provides the prognosis, that is, he tells us the consequences we can expect to follow Judah's spiritual disease if left untreated.

We have three sections in this prologue. Chapter 1 was *Sin and Experience*. Isaiah gave us insight into the national, religious, and social condition of Judah. Chapter 2-4 was *Sin and Election*. Isaiah continued to diagnose the religious and social situation in Judah while also raising for us the difficult question of a chosen people. He followed a vision of ideal Jerusalem, with a sad description of actual Jerusalem. We have to ask, "Will these sinful, apostate people really fill the streets of a new Jerusalem, simply because some time in the past God decided to make their ancestors His chosen people?" The answer was, "No. No, they will not fill the streets of heavenly Jerusalem." The election of the nation of Israel was an election for a special purpose in salvation history. They were chosen to receive God's Covenant Law. They were chosen to be His representatives. They were not chosen for guaranteed, mass salvation. Individual Jews still had a choice to make regarding their personal relationship with God. According to Isaiah's vision, only a remnant will participate in the glory of future Jerusalem. They will participate along with a remnant from many peoples, but not with the majority of Israelites.

We now move into the third and last section of our preface. In chapter 5 Isaiah raises the issue of *Sin and Grace*. When we think of grace from a New Covenant perspective, we tend to think of the specific grace of Christ's atonement. That is the free gift of grace given for our forgiveness. Grace as a free gift can apply more broadly to all the gifts God gives. Paul details gifts of grace lavished on Israel as the chosen people when he laments for them at the beginning of Romans 9.

¹ I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit,
² that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were
accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh,
⁴ who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and
the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, ⁵ whose are the fathers, and
from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

God has done so much for His chosen people. Is there a point where God's grace stops coming? How should God feel when His good gifts are ignored or thrown back into His face? Does the holiness of God demand, at some point, a righteous response of wrath? Can the people of God continue living off the sincerity of their ancestors without a response of their own to the grace of God?

This section divides into two parts. Isaiah begins with the metaphor of a vineyard as a description of God's grace to Israel. He follows with six woes that contrast Israel's sin against the backdrop of God's kindness.

What should be done with such a people? Is there hope for such a people? This final section of the prologue offers none. We begin with the metaphor of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7.

Israel as God's Vineyard (5:1-7)

¹ Let me sing now for my well-beloved My well-beloved had a vineyard	A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. on a fertile hill.
² He dug it all around, removed its stones, And He built a tower in the middle of it Then He expected <i>it</i> to produce <i>good</i> grapes,	And planted it with the choicest vine. And also hewed out a wine vat in it; But it produced <i>only</i> worthless ones.
³ "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem Judge between Me	and men of Judah, and My vineyard.
⁴ "What more was there to do for My vineyard Why, when I expected <i>it</i> to produce <i>good</i> grapes	that I have not done in it? did it produce worthless ones?

⁵ "So now let Me tell you
I will remove its hedge
I will break down its wall
⁶ "I will lay it waste;
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds
to rain no rain on it."
⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.

Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

Isaiah begins the poem from the intimate perspective of a lover singing a song about her beloved. There is some similarity to the Biblical book Song of Solomon. But there is also a lot of difference. There, the vineyard is the body of the lover. That whole poem is a love song. Isaiah's beginning here sounds like a love song, but we quickly see that it is not. The vineyard is not the body of the beloved. The vineyard is something precious to the beloved. Isaiah has drawn us to view God very positively. We who love God are asked to consider the case of Judah from our Beloved's perspective. Like the Church is described as the bride of Christ, Isaiah invites those who love God to rejoice in the goodness of His labor.

¹ Let me sing now for my well-beloved
My well-beloved had a vineyard
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
on a fertile hill.

This is our initial perspective. This is how we are viewing God. Then the singer details the labor of love. We can pause with each phrase to imagine a man at work with glad purpose. First, "He dug it all around, removed its stones." He is plowing up the hillside. You can see him carrying off the stones, maybe setting them apart for later use on the wall of the watchtower. "And [he] planted it with the choicest vine." We envision the man moving down the rows, digging small holes and inserting young vines. And they are not just any kind of vine. He has selected "the choicest vine" for this special vineyard. "And He built a tower in the middle of it." He is fully invested. He intends to live here and watch over this vineyard. "And [he] also hewed out a wine vat in it." He has expectation. He has planted the vineyard with a purpose. He has done a complete work. He is ready for the grapes to come in, to make the wine. There is nothing more to do but wait for the harvest to come in.

Then He expected *it* to produce *good* grapes, But it produced *only* worthless ones.

That last phrase creates a turning point in the poem. All has gone well until the harvest comes in and the fruit turns out to be worthless. The translation of the Hebrew word for those grapes varies. Your Bible might read "worthless grapes," or "bad grapes, or "wild grapes." Motyer comments on the Hebrew, writing,

The word translated *bad fruit*, only found here and in verse 4, means literally 'stink-fruit'. Delitzsch notes that the difference between a wild and a domestic vine is only in the matter of care. This is exactly the point: what can now be done for the people of God when a total work of grace has been lavished on them and yet they remain as if grace had never touched them?⁶

Metaphors do have their limitations. This gracious work of God did not happen over the span of one year. And the bad fruit did not come in only during one harvest. The toil of the Beloved for His vineyard stretches back from the present moment of the poem 800 years to the time of Moses, when God rescued Israel out of Egypt. He made Covenant with them at Sinai. He gave them a good and just Law to live by. He brought them in to their own land and gave them walled cities for protection and the Temple worship with the Psalms. Even before Moses, stretching back another 500 years, God had called Abraham and made with him a Covenant of promise. God gave birth to the twelve tribes and enabled them to grow into a great nation. God's toil over this vineyard has been a long work. And the harvests have been many.

⁶ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 68.

Consider God's patience. Over and over again when the nation turned away from Him, he allowed the consequence of sin to inflict them, but He did not turn them out of the land. He waited patiently for repentance. He has proved Himself slow to anger and quick to forgive, receiving the wayward back instantly. As the people continually struggled with idolatry and sin, God sent workers into the vineyard. Lawsuit prophets, following the model of Elijah and Elisha, keep calling the people back to the way of God.

Should not God expect good fruit when He has lavished so much grace on the people of Israel? But what crop does this present Judah produce? Stink-fruit.

That's an image I can relate to. God has lavished so much grace on me. And still, much too often, stink-fruit comes out. But this image is not directed towards the people who have received God's grace and yet still struggle in their pursuit of God. This image is directed at a people who have persistently turned away from sincere worship, a people who do not even attempt obedience.

Isaiah switches to God as the speaker in verses 3 and 4. God asks this question.

- ³ "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.
⁴ "What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected *it* to produce *good* grapes did it produce worthless ones?"

That was a rhetorical question. God gives His own answer in verses 5 and 6.

- ⁵ "So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.
⁶ "I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it."

God will take away the grace of His protection. He will remove the hedge. "And it will be consumed." God does not only remove His presence. He actively punishes. "I will lay it waste...I will charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." Isaiah sums up the metaphor in verse 7, making sure we have understood.

- ⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
is the house of Israel
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

What crop had God expected from a nation He had so blessed with His Word and His presence through the generations? He expected justice and righteousness. What crop came forth? Bloodshed and a cry of distress.

Isaiah does not suggest that God easily turns away from the work of His hands. He is gonna give us more evidence. He is going to detail Judah's spiritual state as an indictment against them and a justification for God's wrath to be poured out on this people.

Before moving to that indictment, I'd like to make an observation about the poetry of that last line. There is a play on word sounds in the Hebrew. In the first verset the Hebrew for "justice" is "misphat" and the Hebrew for "bloodshed" is "mispah." Then in the second verset the Hebrew for "righteousness" is "tsedaqah" and the Hebrew for "cry of distress" is "tse'aqah": it's, misphat, mispah, tsedaqah, tse'aqah.⁷ I'm not going to be pointing out Hebrew word play or rhyming as we go. Along with most who would listen to this podcast, I am not able to appreciate the Hebrew like I would like. I learn things like this through commentaries. And I believe one of the amazing traits of Hebrew poetry is how much we can pick up on and appreciate in our translations. We have plenty to

⁷ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1721.

recognize and think about just in the English. Still, I mention this example of wordplay as a reminder that there is a whole additional layer of beauty and skill that lies beneath our translations.

One of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry that often translates very well is the structure of the text. We will see that in the next passage, Isaiah 5:8-30, where Isaiah details the stink-fruit of Judah.

The Stink-Fruit Crop: Final diagnosis and prognosis (5:8-30)

The text is structured in a series of six woes. There is also a parallel set of therefore's after the first two woes and then after the next four woes. This is the pattern: woe, woe, shorter therefore, longer therefore, woe, woe, woe, woe, shorter therefore, longer therefore. The number six woes works well as a human number. Man, both male and female, was created on the sixth day. But without the seventh day of God's rest, the man is unable to live in the fullness of who he is created to be. Six is one short of seven. It is humanism without God. The total of six woes emphasizes fallen humanity, the fallenness of Judah apart from right relationship with her Creator.

Our first set of two woes addresses the abuse of life's material benefits. Our second set of four woes addresses failure in the spiritual and moral obligations of life. This stink-fruit crop serves as a powerful indictment.⁸ Let's read each woe separately before moving on to the next one. We begin with our first woe in verses 8-10.

The first woe, verses 8-10.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>⁸ Woe to those who add house to house
Until there is no more room,</p> | <p><i>and</i> join field to field,
So that you have to live alone in the midst
of the land!</p> |
| <p>⁹ In my ears the LORD of hosts <i>has sworn</i>,</p> | <p>"Surely, many houses shall become desolate,
<i>Even</i> great and fine ones, without occupants.</p> |
| <p>¹⁰ "For ten acres of vineyard will yield <i>only</i> one bath
of wine,</p> | <p>And a homer of seed will yield <i>but</i> an ephah
of grain."</p> |

First, let me mention that the idea of woe is connected to the idea of Covenant curse. Curse in the Biblical sense is not some kind of magical or spiritual curse that a person can try to place on another person, like a hex or something. That's an altogether different use of the word "curse." The idea of Biblical curse is punishment from a rightful King against Covenant breakers. Woe to those means, "Let them be cursed." Cursed in this sense, "Let the rightful anger of their covenant king fall on them because they have turned against him."

The specific woe here is a calling of Covenant punishment on the wealthy who abuse their wealth in a way that bears down on and pushes out the less fortunate. Wealth and land in Israel are supposed to be understood as a stewardship. God owns the land. He gives that land as possession to be used in a way that honors Him. Old Covenant law does not oppose the idea of personal property. It validates that idea. But that property is supposed to be used in stewardship. So, when does the accumulation of wealth become stink-fruit to the nose of God?

The adding of house to house and field to field creates this picture of the extremely wealthy living alone in the middle of a land they have gobbled up. There is no place for the less wealthy to live. "Many houses will become desolate, even great and fine ones." The workers are gone, forced out. The land is no longer used as a means of produce and support. A huge vineyard of ten acres yields a meager result of wine. And a basket of seed produces only a cup of grain.

The drive for amassing wealth with no regard for people and no regard for the produce from the land brings a curse onto society for which the greedy are accountable. The second woe is in verse 11 and 12.

The second woe, verses 11-12.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>¹¹ Woe to those who rise early in the morning
Who stay up late in the evening</p> | <p>that they may pursue strong drink,
that wine may inflame them!</p> |
|---|---|

⁸ Motyer, 70.

¹² Their banquets are *accompanied* by lyre and harp, But they do not pay attention to the deeds
by tambourine and flute, and by wine; of the Lord
Nor do they consider the work of His hands.

Verse 11 could apply to a severe alcoholic who drinks all day from when they rise early in the morning until late in the evening. But the reference to banquets accompanied with all kinds of musical instruments points again towards the wealthy, the potential leaders of society. Rather than taking the opportunity afforded by their wealth to steward society, they take their wealth as means for pursuing unending pleasure. It is no wonder they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, distracted as they are by food and entertainment and strong drink all day long. It is surprising they can stand. They have rendered themselves unable to discern the things that God is doing.

And there is a double charge in the accusation that they do not consider the work of His hands. First, they do not consider the many gracious ways that God has blessed them. They live off a societal foundation of knowledge, and order, and blessing that has made their own wealth and achievements possible. They take for granted all that God has done before them to make possible the kind of society they live in. Second, they do not pay attention to the punishment that currently afflicts them. That is also the work of God's hand. That's the idea of the stricken man in chapter 1 who is wounded from the sole of his foot even to his head, and yet has no awareness that his own worldview and behavior are the cause of the pain, and God is disciplining them to get them to turn around. They have no discernment.

There are consequences to this abuse of material blessing. Isaiah will talk about those consequences. He is providing us a prognosis in a shorter "therefore" and a longer "therefore." The shorter "therefore" is just verse 13.

A shorter therefore, verse 13.

¹³ Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge;
And their honorable men are famished, And their multitude is parched with thirst.

Here is the bottom-line. The final Covenant curse listed in Deuteronomy 28 is exile. The lack of knowledge is self-inflicted. They refuse God as a source of wisdom. The one thing they will not do is turn to Him in repentance. That refusal affects all levels of society. "Honorable men" here does not mean "men of moral integrity." It refers to the wealthy in society, to the leaders who hold honorable positions. They will experience hunger and thirst together with the multitude. No one is excluded.

The longer "therefore" is in verses 14-17.

A longer therefore, verses 14-17.

¹⁴ Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure;
And Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry and the jubilant within her,
descend into it.
¹⁵ So the *common* man will be humbled The eyes of the proud also will be abased.
and the man of *importance* abased,
¹⁶ But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, And the holy God will show Himself holy
in righteousness.
¹⁷ Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture, And strangers will eat in the waste places
of the wealthy.

Sheol, or death, is depicted as a greedy monster whose mouth opens wide to swallow all the splendor of Jerusalem. The banquets, and all the musical instruments, and all the flowing wine goes down the gullet. The phrase, Jerusalem's splendor, connects us back to the description of Jerusalem in chapter 3. All that is considered beautiful and extravagant, the sweet perfume, is turned to putrefaction as it slips and slides down the throat of death.

Verses 15 and 16 connect us back to chapter 2 with a high-low theme that played out there. All men, common and important, will be brought down low, abased. Proud eyes that once looked down on

God will not look down in shame. This bringing down is juxtaposed beside God's exaltation. God will show Himself holy in His righteous judgment. As they are brought down, God is raised up. The land of Judah will be wiped clean of this people. That's the picture in verse 17, where lambs graze freely in empty pastures and strangers eat in waste places created by the indifference of the wealthy.

We move next to a second set of woes. The first two woes described the abuse of material wealth. The next four describe spiritual and moral failure. The third woe is in verses 18-20

The third woe, verses 18-19

- | | |
|--|--|
| ¹⁸ Woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords
of falsehood, | And sin as if with cart ropes; |
| ¹⁹ Who say, "Let Him make speed, let Him hasten
His work,
And let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel | that we may see <i>it</i> ;

draw near and come to pass, that we may know <i>it!</i> " |

Isaiah describes sin as a cart being drawn along behind a person. They are not innocently bound to the burden. They drag it willfully with cords of falsehood. That falsehood could be deceit used to gain whatever purposes the sinner desires. But because of the next verse, I think falsehood here points to self-deceit. They have convinced themselves of the truthfulness of their own corrupt path. They do not even seem to be aware that the burden they drag is a consequence of their own behavior.

They mock the warning of the prophet, saying, "Let God make speed, let him hasten His work that we may see it." That is either a taunt to a God who they do not really believe in, "Let Him act. I'm ready. Strike me dead if you're so powerful. No, God? Nothing? I'm still walking along. No smell of lightning here, God!" It is either a taunt like that or they believe that God must act on their behalf. "Okay, God. Do your thing. Make my life better. Don't you see I have this heavy load to bear, God? Why don't you help me pull it for a while? Hurry up your work!" There is a complete lack of understanding. They do not discern that they are responsible. And they do not discern that God's slowness to act is mercy, because righteousness is calling God to bring down wrath. He is not going to come down and help you drag the cart of sin. The fourth woe is in verse 20.

The fourth woe, verse 20.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good,
Who substitute darkness for light
Who substitute bitter for sweet | and good evil;
and light for darkness;
and sweet for bitter! |
|--|--|

Who is the one that calls evil "good?" It manifests itself in all different kind of ways in different societies and different times. It is the one who celebrates the abuse of the poor as good business sense. It is the one who manipulates the courts of justice for personal gain. It is the one who preaches the goodness of gay marriage. It is the one who or argues that dogs and dolphins have the same level of intrinsic value as human beings who are made in the image of God. As societies devolve away from God's word, people develop all kinds of moral ideas. They define their own virtue. Eventually, they get to the point where they are actually substituting darkness for light and light for darkness. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:32,

Although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

The fifth woe in verse 21 follows up this idea.

The fifth woe, verse 21.

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| ²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes | And clever in their own sight! |
|---|--------------------------------|

This is the mocker of the Proverbs or of Psalm 1. This is not the naïve person who does not know something is evil. This is not the foolish person, who knows, but does it anyway. This mocker has turned morality upside down. He believes in his own cleverness. The fool and the naïve are drawn in by the mocker. They think he is wise. But moral discernment has been lost. It sounds smart. It's

skeptical. It's critical. It's proud. It's wisdom in their own eyes. In the end, it's foolishness. The sixth woe is in verses 22-23.

The sixth woe, verses 22-23.

²² Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine	And valiant men in mixing strong drink,
²³ Who justify the wicked for a bribe,	And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!

What virtues are extolled? They are heroes in drinking wine. They are not heroes who stand up for God. They are not heroes who fight for the downtrodden. They are heroes in wild parties and unscrupulous boardrooms. They have perverted the courts with bribes to protect their own profits. This woe creates a chiasmic envelope with the first two woes. The first woe began with the abuse of material wealth that left no place for the poor. The second woe considered the abuse of that wealth in drinking from morning until night. Here we have similar accusations in reverse order. First, they redefine morality to honor a man who is valiant in strong drink and then they praise the man who uses wealth to overturn the courts of justice. Isaiah provides a shorter "therefore" in verse 24. This is what is coming.

A shorter therefore, verse 24.

²⁴ Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble	And dry grass collapses into the flame,
So their root will become like rot	and their blossom blow away as dust;
For they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts	And despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Speaking of chiasm, note the poetic balance in the first line of verse 24. Isaiah starts with fire and ends with flame: fire, stubble, dry grass, flame. This is the fate of a society that has wholly turned away from the Lord. The result is described in this vivid, accessible imagery as both flame and rot. You can see the tongue of fire reaching out to consume the stubble of the shorn field. As it does, the dry grass collapses into flame. Or consider the root of the vine that has become like rot. The dry, browned blossoms produce no fruit, but instead blow away as dust.

Those are Isaiah's images for this society that has rejected the Law of the Lord of hosts. I have heard a speaker compare Europe to a cut flower. It still looks beautiful momentarily. But there is no credit given to the Judeo-Christian rootedness that has led to the rule of law, that has led to the value of children and the equality of men and women. The values that have formed this foundation of society that had helped to result in incredible wealth are discarded. It's not even that somebody else has cut the flower away from the root. The flower has cut itself off from its root. And it will become brown and blow away as dust. We get in the last line a double intensification. Not only have they rejected the Law – "rejected" is strong enough - they have despised it. And not only is it the Word of the Lord of hosts, the Lord of armies, the One who could easily stand as a wall of protection around this society, but it is also the Holy One of Israel. Who have they despised? They have despised the One who is moral perfection. And not just any Holy One. They have despised the Holy One with whom they have special relationship: the Holy One of Israel. The final response, the longer "therefore" doesn't actually begin with the word, "therefore". Isaiah uses a synonym on this account. It is the same idea. This is God's response. And the response is righteous, verses 25-30,

A longer therefore, verses 25-30

²⁵ On this account the anger of the LORD has burned against His people, And the mountains quaked,	And He has stretched out His hand against them and struck them down. and their corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the streets.
For all this His anger is not spent,	But His hand is still stretched out.
²⁶ He will also lift up a standard to the distant nation, And behold, it will come with speed swiftly.	And will whistle for it from the ends of the earth;
²⁷ No one in it is weary or stumbles, Nor is the belt at its waist undone,	None slumbers or sleeps; Nor its sandal strap broken.

²⁸ Its arrows are sharp
The hoofs of its horses seem like flint
²⁹ Its roaring is like a lioness,
It growls as it seizes the prey
³⁰ And it will growl over it in that day
If one looks to the land,
and all its bows are bent;
and its *chariot* wheels like a whirlwind.
and it roars like young lions;
And carries *it* off with no one to deliver *it*.
like the roaring of the sea.
behold, there is darkness *and* distress;
Even the light is darkened by its clouds.

What fire licked up Israel as dry grass in a field? It is the anger of the Lord that has burned against them. That idea of God's anger burning against His sinful people goes back to the very beginning of the nation at Mt. Sinai. From the start, their wandering hearts drifted away from God's Word. He had just said, "Make no idols." They made an idol. They would fashion God in an image that fit their own vision of what He should be like. At that time, God drew Moses up into his own anger and into his own compassion. Moses also burned with anger and then Moses pled for mercy. Both of these realities are true in God's heart: there is this righteous anger against sin, and yet there is love and mercy for His people. God responded He could not go up in the midst of such a sinful people because His holiness would surely consume them on the way. Moses persisted, arguing, "What's the point then? How can we be your people if you are not among us?" God relented. But then perhaps Moses became worried, recognizing he had just invited holy fire to dwell among a very flammable people. How could God go up with a sinful people? Moses then asked of God, "Show me your glory." God told him he could not handle the sight of His glory. But He did speak His glory, declaring to Moses His name in Exodus 34:6-7.

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished... (Exodus 34:6-7)

The great theological question of Exodus is pictured in the burning bush. How does holy fire remain on a flammable bush without burning it up? How does holy God live with a sinful people without consuming them? It has to do with God's nature. He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth."

And so, He has continued on with His people through the generations. But does the gracious character of God mean that He will allow sin to go unpunished indefinitely? No. The verse continued, "who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished..." God's grace has been abused for generations. God's patience is at an end. He is slow to anger. That is not the same as saying He does not become angry. God's anger has begun to burn against Judah. There is no hope depicted in this last passage, only wrath.

Isaiah introduces two phrases here that he will employ through the whole of his prophecy. First, God stretches out His hand. We will see that phrase repeatedly. God is in the field as a King directing His army. Imagine Him on horseback, at the head of a mighty horde, stretching out His arm, pointing at you. The Lord of Hosts is not stretching His arm out against the enemies of Israel. He is pointing straight at Isaiah's readers: straight at Jerusalem.

Corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the street. That reference finds connection to the very last paragraph of the prophecy (chapter 66), where Isaiah depicts corpses laying in a field, having lost their battle against God. Here, in 5:25, after that terrible image is drawn on our minds, Isaiah utters these ominous words, "For all this His anger is not spent, but His hand is still stretched out." The wrath of God will keep coming.

The second phrase to be carried through the book is the phrase, "He will also lift up a standard..." The idea of the lifted standard will be connected to the idea of a sign. That idea is also found in the last paragraph of the prophecy in chapter 66. God is the King of kings who lifts up His own standard, His banner. And in this case in chapter 5, a distant nation responds to His call. God whistles and they hasten to His banner with great speed. No doubt Isaiah's listeners envisioned the army of Assyria as

they read these words. No one in the world had ever before seen anything like the army of Assyria, the destroyer of nations. They were able to field multiply armies, not one army but multiple armies of 50,000 men, all equipped with iron weapons. They fought with well-integrated infantry, cavalry, chariots, and archers. No city had withstood their siege engines.

Listen again to the description.

²⁷ No one in it is weary or stumbles, Nor is the belt at its waist undone,	None slumbers or sleeps; Nor its sandal strap broken.
²⁸ Its arrows are sharp The hoofs of its horses seem like flint	and all its bows are bent; and its <i>chariot</i> wheels like a whirlwind.

The sound of the army is terrifying. Isaiah likens it to the sound of young lions in their prime as they attack and devour their prey. Then he skillfully heightens the effect by likening the roaring to the overwhelming power of the sea.

²⁹ Its roaring is like a lioness, It growls as it seizes the prey	and it roars like young lions; And carries <i>it</i> off with no one to deliver <i>it</i> .
³⁰ And it will growl over it in that day If one looks to the land,	like the roaring of the sea. behold, there is darkness <i>and</i> distress;
Even the light is darkened by its clouds.	

The grace of God has been spurned again and again over hundreds of years. This people holds Yahweh in contempt. They reject His Word. They despise Him, the Holy One of Israel. God's wrath will be unleashed against Judah. Is there hope for those who reject the grace of God? No. There is not. Not here.

This chapter ends in darkness. Isaiah will be called into this darkness. He will be sent into the vineyard. He has given us the context of that call. We are now ready to consider how that call will form Isaiah's entire ministry experience. That's our next lesson. We will address Isaiah's call next time in Isaiah chapter 6.

Reflection questions

1. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Following the flow of thought in 5:1-7, what has God done for Israel? What question does God ask in light of what he has done? And what conclusion does God regarding what he ought to do?
3. Consider each woe separately. What kind of behavior is being described of people in the Judah of Isaiah's day. And what are one or two examples of that behavior in your current society?
 - a. Woe 1 – 5:8-10?
 - b. Woe 2 – 5:11-12?
 - c. Woe 3 – 5:18-19?
 - d. Woe 4 – 5:20?
 - e. Woe 5 – 5:21?
 - f. Woe 6 – 5:22-23?
4. What stands out to you in the two therefores of 5:24-30? What image is especially striking?
5. Isaiah gave a glimmer of hope in the first two sections of this prologue. In chapter 1 that glimmer came in 1:18. In 2-4 that glimmer came in the depictions of ideal and future Jerusalem. There is no glimmer of hope in chapter 5. Why not?
6. How are we supposed to understand the issue of grace and sin in this chapter? Consider the grace described in the vineyard metaphor. God has done all this. Then consider the woes and how those show Judah's response to God. How ought God respond to such a people?

“Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,
“Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”
Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!” ⁹ He said, “Go, and tell this people:
‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.’
¹⁰ “Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed.”

¹¹ Then I said, “Lord, how long?” And He answered,
“Until cities are devastated *and* without inhabitant, Houses are without people
And the land is utterly desolate,
¹² “The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst
of the land.
¹³ “Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, And it will again be *subject* to burning,
Like a terebinth or an oak
Whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”

Vision of God

The year is right around 740 BC, the year Uzziah died. Uzziah’s leadership had been marked with success and glory. 2 Chronicles 26 tells us the king’s fame extended to the border of Egypt. He built towers, and he developed agriculture; he fielded an extensive army with advanced engines of war. Judah seemed to be in a very secure position under Uzziah. That was changing. Five years before Uzziah’s death, Tiglath-Pileser III ascended to the throne of Assyria, quickly defeating the other kingdoms of Mesopotamia and launching Assyria on a path to become one of the strongest empires ever known. By 740 BC, the shadow of Assyria had begun to stretch over the Levant. An Assyrian inscription boasts a victory by Tiglath-Pileser over Uzziah in this year of 740 BC. It is into this context of internal moral decay and external military danger, set up for us in chapters 1-5, that God reveals himself to this Jew of Jerusalem, Isaiah son of Amoz.

Isaiah’s vision is recorded in verses 1-6. The whole chapter is a mixture of prose narrative and poetry. The words spoken by God, by the angels, and by Isaiah, those are all poetic verse. I am addressing this text with hesitation because I know that I will not do justice to the experience that Isaiah is communicating to us. This was not something Isaiah saw with emotional objectiveness. Isaiah will be overwhelmed by his vision of God. I remember one time in our first apartment after Brenda and I had joined staff, I sat alone in our small living room spending devotional time with God. A praise CD played. I don’t remember the song. I remember being overwhelmed. I felt fear. I wouldn’t say I was afraid. It was not the power of God that was making me bow my head but the weight of His moral perfection. I did not think about it at the time. I was just having this experience of the awe of God. I felt His holiness. At the same time, I felt my sinfulness. In whatever way you may have felt something like that, the weighty or terrifying awe of God’s holy presence, try to tap into that feeling as you consider this vision that has pierced through Isaiah’s mind, through his heart, into his gut.

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the Temple. We will end this chapter with the people of Judah not seeing. We begin with Isaiah seeing. This is true sight. The Lord sits on a throne. We are not worried about Uzziah. We are not worried about Tiglath-Pileser. The Lord God sits on a throne. He rules over the affairs of men. His presence cannot be contained by the magnificent Temple of Solomon. Just the very end of His robe is enough to fill it. God is not alone.

² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

Those are the words Isaiah has for himself. This is not about the people out there in a wicked society. This is the experience of the prophet. “I am a man of unclean lips. How can I speak for God? I can’t stand before God myself. I am the sinful one. My lips are unclean. Woe is me. I am cursed. I have broken Covenant. I am ruined.” A true vision of God reveals something about His glorious nature, which must also turn back on the one who experiences Him. The fig leaves are removed. He sees through. Nothing can hide the truth about our own sinfulness. To truly know God is to be personally undone. The false images, excuses, justifications, diminishment of sin that we have made in our own mind, it is all undone. We are ruined before the holiness of God. Songs about “I just did it my way” and poems about being “the captain of my own soul” is all revealed as moronic foolishness when you stand before God as He is. When you see the King, the Lord of hosts, you know without argument or doubt that the burning anger of His holy goodness must destroy you. And you know that it is right.

In this moment Isaiah sees himself as just another one of the wicked inhabitants of Judah, a man of unclean lips in the midst of a people of unclean lips. All the ruin Isaiah prophesied concerning the wicked in chapter 5 is now applied to him. He is the one who has taken for granted the grace of God. He is the one whose hypocrisy is revealed. He is the one who lacks compassion and love for the broken in society. There is a powerful message here for everybody who feels safe in church, pointing at the sinfulness of those outside of church. Is his sin as great as those around him? From a human perspective, no. If we want to argue the relative badness of different sins, the wicked of society have done much worse than Isaiah had done. But standing before the holy glory of God it does not matter one whit whether this person is worse than that person. Better or worse, who cares? In this moment Isaiah is only aware of his own sin, brought to light in the holy presence. He is a man of unclean lips, no different than the people. The people must die. He must die. As the nation descended into darkness at the end of chapter 5, Isaiah too, must be consumed, swallowed up by the gaping mouth of Sheol. And yet, he is not.

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ He touched my mouth *with it* and said,

“Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

Burning fire is always in the Bible a symbol of God’s wrath. But not here. God’s wrath must burn sin away. Here, that fire burns away only the sin, not the sinner. It is a purifying fire, touching the point where the man has realized his sinfulness. “I am a man of unclean lips...behold, this has touched your lips and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.” The two ideas presented here of what God has done with Isaiah’s sin are the same two ideas symbolized on the Day of Atonement instituted by God in Leviticus 16. The word “forgiven” that I’ve read here from my Bible translation is literally, “atoned.” Your sin is atoned for. To atone is to “cover” or to “satisfy” wrath. God’s presence hovered over the Ark of the Covenant in the innermost place of the Tabernacle. In that Holy of Holies, angels were depicted on the tent curtains and made to kneel on the lid to the Ark of the Covenant. The Covenant tablets God had given to Moses lay inside of the Ark. Looking down at the Ark was looking down on that Covenant. And when God looked at the Covenant, He saw the unfaithfulness of His people. Each year they were guilty of breaking the Law in so many ways. Two goats were required to symbolically deal with the sin of the people. The blood of the first goat was sprinkled on the cover of the Ark. That was the place of atonement. God’s wrath must be satisfied. The wages of sin is death. The blood of that goat symbolized a death that served as substitute for the people. God would make a way to satisfy His wrath against sin without consuming the sinner. As He looked down on the Law, He saw the blood on the Ark that covered, or atoned for the sin of Israel. That is the second idea communicated here by the seraph when he touched Isaiah’s lips with the coal. Isaiah’s sin was forgiven, atoned for.

The first idea the seraph communicated to Isaiah that his iniquity is taken away is represented by the second goat on the Day of Atonement. The high priest laid his hands on that goat, symbolically laying upon it the sin of the people. Then that goat was set loose in the wilderness to symbolize the idea of God removing the iniquity of his people from them. David communicated that idea in Psalm 103:12,

¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Isaiah does not yet know the means by which God will accomplish this atonement. He simply knows that he deserved wrath and instead received forgiving grace.

Isaiah's vision of God reveals a lasting effect on his ministry in at least three ways. Isaiah maintains the holiness and supremacy of God throughout his preaching. That's number one. Number two, he also maintains a sense of the sinfulness of human beings that does not spring from the heart of a holy prophet judging the wickedness around him. Isaiah's recognition of human sin begins with self-awareness his own fallenness. He knows himself to be polluted. Number three, Isaiah has experienced the atonement of God. This is not anything that Isaiah did for himself. He deserved to be undone. Instead, God removed his sin. The hope of cleansing grace always adorns Isaiah's message, even when that message is certain doom for the nation as a whole. It is interesting to know that Isaiah's name literally means, "salvation of Yahweh." Isaiah knows from this experience that even when wrath is right and just, the possibility of salvation for the sinner exists.

Invitation of God

Having seen God, having seen himself, having experienced atoning grace, Isaiah is now in a position to hear and respond to the invitation of God.

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Interestingly, God has not addressed Isaiah directly at all in this vision. There is a sense of majestic presence surrounding God. We sense that no one does anything in this place without God's direction. An angel would not have taken a coal to Isaiah's lips unless God commanded. Still, God has only worked through mediators to this point, just as we would expect from a King of kings. He ought to be unapproachable. Even the invitation we have just heard is directed toward the angelic host, not towards Isaiah.

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

The "us" here, just as in Genesis 1:26, might naturally be assumed to include the angels surrounding the throne of God. He is the Lord of hosts. They participate in the execution of His purposes. Also, as in Genesis 1:26, we have to wonder if the "us" points to the reality of the triune nature of God; he is three in one. God does communicate his triune nature through Isaiah. We will see that in chapter 9. It is possible that this "us" hints in that direction. Though the image set up for us is a king addressing his court.

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Though not addressed directly to Isaiah. Isaiah is now the central focus of this court. The atoning action of burning coal has drawn angelic attention to him. God does call some prophets more directly. They do not even seem to have a choice, if you think about Moses, or Jeremiah, later Paul.

Here God speaks out the invitation in such a way that we might not fault Isaiah if he were to look around for one of the seraphim to speak up and accept. Who is he, anyway, surrounded by such a powerful and holy company?

That is not what happens. Something clicks inside of Isaiah. His desire is to do the will of God. He responds immediately from some inner compulsion.

Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

This is Isaiah's second response. He responded to the vision of God's holiness with despair over his own sin. He now responds to God's forgiving grace and to God's invitation to service with all he has to offer, himself. "Here am I. Send me!"

The naivete of Isaiah's response reminds me how often this is the way. It reminds me of the first Lord of the Rings movie after Frodo has just agreed to take the ring to Mount Doom, facing certain death

or worse, Pippin runs in and insists on going too. And then, after committing himself he asks, “Right, where are we going?” And maybe Abraham is a better example. It took a lot of faith to leave his family in Haran and venture out to the promised land. Still, he had no idea how long it would take before he received a son. He did not understand that he would never personally own the land. He did not expect famine and fear. He certainly could not have foreseen God requiring that he sacrifice Isaac. I wonder if Abraham would have said, “Here am I. Send me!” if he knew all the pain that was going to be involved in following God. I am afraid I would not have had the courage to leave North Carolina as a missionary if I had any idea of the struggle and pain that would go with it. You can only say Isaiah’s response is arrogance, and I think that’s how some old people look at young people when they say they’re going to go and change the world. But I think that’s the wrong way to take it. Yes, there is a large dose of youthful idealism and naivete. Even with that, I know my response was real. Yeah, I don’t really get where we’re going or how it’s going to all work, but that response, when it’s a real response to the invitation, there’s nothing else you can say. “Here am I. Send me!” God needs somebody to go. I’m somebody.

Isaiah doesn’t have any idea where he is to be sent or what he is supposed to do. Just as the vision preceded the invitation - the call - the call has preceded the mission. God hasn’t told Isaiah what his mission is going to be yet. Isaiah simply agrees to do the will of God, whatever that will may be.

As it turns out, it is quite a good thing that Isaiah’s primary motivation is to do the will of God, and that that motivation springs out of his vision of the holiness of God, because the mission that God has for him is not going to be very motivating. It is going to be tragic, and difficult, and unappreciated. Here is the mission and Isaiah’s third response, verses 9-13.

Mission of God

⁹ He said, “Go, and tell this people:

‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive;	Keep on looking, but do not understand.’
¹⁰ “Render the hearts of this people insensitive,	Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,	Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts,	And return and be healed.”

¹¹ Then I said, “Lord, how long?” And He answered,

“Until cities are devastated *and* without inhabitant, Houses are without people
And the land is utterly desolate,

¹² “The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst
of the land.

¹³ “Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, And it will again be *subject* to burning,
Like a terebinth or an oak
Whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”

Isaiah is supposed to tell the people, “keep listening with your ears and keep looking with your eyes. But you will not be able to accurately process the data of your eyes and ears. You will not perceive or understand God, you will not perceive or understand yourself, you will not perceive or understand why things are happening the way they are happening.” That’s not a surprising message delivered to the people described in Isaiah 1-5. They drifted far from God spiritually and morally. They have come up with a new view of God, a new system of morality that justifies their own desires. They may look around them and see problems in their society, but they are not going to identify those problems as stemming from their sinful behavior. They are not going to say, “Society is messed up because we failed to relate to God with submission and humility.” They will see without perceiving.

In verse 10, God says Isaiah’s message will have an effect on the people of Judah. It is not the kind of effect you would expect God to want His prophet to create. You would expect God to send a prophet with a message that pierces hearts and moves people to understanding. That is what happened some

thirty years before this, when Jonah delivered his message to Judah's enemies the Assyrians. There was repentance.

God forewarns Isaiah not to expect national revival. Isaiah's message about the true state of Israel will have the opposite effect. It will render hearts insensitive. One of the mysteries of this passage is that we cannot quite tell whether God intends Himself to harden the people of Israel for destruction, like he did to Pharaoh and the leaders of Egypt, or whether the negative response to Isaiah's message is a natural response of a sinful people who love the darkness and hate the light.

The effect is described as completely comprehensive. That is emphasized by the chiasm arrangement of heart, ears, eyes, eyes, ears, heart. Isaiah's message will act as a catalyst that causes this spiritually unresponsive people to be even more resistant to the truth of God.

¹⁰ "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed."

Is God's intention to prevent His people from repenting? It is not easy to tell just looking at this passage. As so often with a declaration or thesis at the beginning of a Biblical book, it is unwise to jump to an interpretation that satisfies our own theological perspective or system, rather than waiting to see how the author himself develops the idea in the rest of the book.

Context is king when it comes to interpretation. We really need Isaiah to develop this for us. The primary context for the mission God has just given him is the rest of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah will show his understanding of the mission in the way that he carries out the mission, you know, in the rest of the prophecy.

What will we see Isaiah doing? Though we are correct to recognize the sophistication of Isaiah's poetry, the moral message Isaiah delivers to Judah is quite direct. Come back to the Covenant! Stop being hypocritical in your worship. Care for the oppressed. Do what is right. Trust God. We will see in chapter 28 the criticism against Isaiah that he lacks sophistication. He will be told that his message to trust God is too simplistic for international politics. It's too easy! Just trust God! Just trust God! They will make fun of his prophecy, likening it to the babbling of a child just learning to speak. "That's how simple you are, Isaiah!"

There is haziness in the details of Isaiah's message when he begins to speak of the far distant future. And the further out he goes, the harder it is to understand all the details of the prophecy. But even then, the main points of the message are quite direct. Compare the first passage in chapter 1 with the last passage in chapter 66 which takes place at the end of time, and you will see in both places the same message of judgment on a rebellious people who refuse to submit to the knowledge of the Lord. They do not know their God.

Isaiah will not render people's hearts insensitive and dull by giving them a confusing, mystic, irrational message. That's not the mission. Isaiah will render the people's hearts insensitive by giving them simple truth.

Jesus described the state of the human heart in John 3:19, "The light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil." The darkness in a man responds negatively to moral light. Jesus went on to say in John 9:39, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

If you're confused and you're humble, and you just don't have an idea, you know you don't understand and you don't see, those are the kind of people who are ready to receive the message of Jesus. And in receiving, they saw, like the blind man in John 9. But if you think you know, you got it all figured out, you see, then in Jesus' coming you are blind. You think you see but you don't see a thing. Shining true light on the morally blind might produce repentance. The more natural human response is to hate the light and to try to eliminate it. Isaiah has been sent with a message of truth. That message will drive the majority further into decay, further into the darkness of their own corruption.

It also may be that verse 10 contains an ironic perspective. That would fit with what we will see in the rest of Isaiah and in what I've just described in the ministry of Jesus. The irony pivots on the word "otherwise."

¹⁰ "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed."

In this passage the irony would be that, even though it sounds like we don't want them to return and be healed, render their hearts insensitive, otherwise they'll return and be healed, irony is that what is stated is not what is really desired. We would have to think of this passage in a way like this, "Render them insensitive and dull because we certainly would not want them to see and hear and understand and return and be healed. God forbid that they come back to Him and be healed!" The irony in the way the world often lashes out at the Christian message is that the Christian message, and hopefully the Christian delivering the message, truly desires the best possible result for people who are lashing out. We are offering them life. And yet, the message of Jesus is often portrayed as narrow, or bigoted, or stifling, or greedy, or simplistic. It smells like death to many who are dead, when in reality it is the true fragrance of life. God forbid that we would preach such a message; such a message that proclaims your eternal Word, that says every child, every woman, every man is created in the image of God; that says God wants to make you whole; that God wants a loving relationship with you, He wants to live with you forever! God forbid that we preach such an awful message! God forbid that people would actually listen, and return, and be healed, and live forever! That's a possible way to understand this passage. I am not sure it is the right interpretation. I think it is possible. I do know that even though God plans to fulfill His promise and bring the full weight of Covenant curse onto unfaithful Judah, He also has plans for a remnant that will indeed return and experience the same healing that Isaiah has experienced here.

Let's consider Isaiah's response to the mission. He does not question the validity of the mission. But he does have a question about the mission. His response is simple. "Then I said, 'Lord, how long?'"

And God answered,

Until cities are devastated *and* without inhabitant, Houses are without people
And the land is utterly desolate,

¹² The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst
of the land.

¹³ Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, And it will again be *subject* to burning,
Like a terebinth or an oak

Whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

Judah is moving towards the curse of exile. Isaiah really has a dark message to communicate. But even in this there is a glimmer of hope for some. The nation is likened to an oak tree that will be cut down and burned. The burning is not a cleansing one. It is the burning of God's wrath. The hope is in the stump, which is called "a holy seed." If the tree is the nation, the holy seed is a remnant that will regrow one day. The reference to a holy seed seems to have another function as well.

This chapter began by dating Isaiah's vision to the death of Uzziah. Isaiah is the only Old Testament writer to ever mark a year by the death of a king. The expected reference would be to note the year of this king's reign, saying "in the 52nd year of Uzziah." But Isaiah points out it is the year of Uzziah's death. Why? I think we are supposed to remember something about Uzziah. You know anything else about Uzziah? And there is one thing everybody in Isaiah's day would have thought of when Isaiah mentioned his death. They would have thought, "Oh yes, the day the leper king died." Through much of his reign Uzziah was known as a good king. And as a good king, he was blessed with wisdom, and wealth, and power. I mentioned at the beginning how his fame stretched to Egypt. Well, at the height of his fame, Uzziah became proud, and he entered the Temple of God, and took upon himself the role of a priest and offered incense on the altar. 2 Chronicles 26 tells us that 80 priests joined

together to rebuke him. Uzziah became infuriated with them. But before he could act, he was struck with leprosy. Uzziah finished out his days living in a separate house, while his son Jotham reigned on his behalf. That's what the people of Jerusalem would have thought of when they read, "In the year of Uzziah's death."

Now, the leprosy of Uzziah makes me think back to Isaiah's image in chapter 1 of the man beaten from the sole of his foot to his head and covered with welts and raw wounds, unbandaged. Spiritual depravity is easily compared to leprosy. The nerves of the leper cease to function, so the diseased person is not aware of being cut or burned. They do not feel it. They don't know they're damaging themselves. Likewise, a spiritually diseased person is not fully aware of the damage they do to spirit and soul through their behavior. They do not feel it. Uzziah can be taken as a symbol of the current state of Judah, proud, yet leprous; unable to perceive their self-inflicted damage.

Understanding the reference to Uzziah's death, we see an *inclusio* Isaiah has created between the first idea in this chapter and the last. We start with the death of Uzziah. We end with the tree being struck down. The king represents the nation. The holy seed is a future son of David. He is the branch we will encounter in chapter 11.

And we do not have to choose whether or not the holy seed is the nation, or the holy seed is Messiah. The promise of a seed to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 is understood in both the corporate and individual sense. "In your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Seed is both the people of Israel and also the one special son of Israel who will provide salvation blessing for the nations.

So, this last line of chapter 6 hints at the theme of all of Isaiah 1-39, which we are calling, The Book of the King. Who is this holy seed? What kind of king will be able to carry righteous government on His shoulders? Who will this Son of David be?

Conclusion

Let's conclude by making Isaiah chapter 6 personal. I have two questions for you that this passage has raised for me to personally think about. I do not intend for this to be judgmental. It is more of an opportunity to make sure your heart is calibrated. We all need to evaluate and make adjustments as we go. Here is the first question. God says, "Whom shall I send?" What is your response?

Do you need to know where He will send you? Do you need to know what He will ask of you? Does that really matter? God says, "Whom shall I send?" It is not a rhetorical question. It is an invitation. What is your heart response to God? Do you respond, "Here I am Lord, send me?" If you do, tell God. Respond with prayer from your heart. Say it in your own words, "Here I am Lord, send me!"

"Whatever role you have for me, whether it is to change what I am doing now or to keep doing it for your glory, whether it is to go from this place I'm living now or to stay here for your glory, whatever role you have for me, Lord, here I am, send me."

That was the first recalibration question. Here is the second.

If you have responded, "Here I am Lord, send me," and you have a sense of the mission you are called to do, is your focus more on the mission, or is your focus more on your vision of who God is? Which takes precedent? What drives you? What sustains you? What do you communicate to others? When you stand up to speak, do you communicate the mission, or do you communicate your vision of God, the awe, and wonder, and gratitude you have towards God as He has revealed Himself to be?

Isaiah offers in this description of his own experience a reality check for our own hearts. The mission is important. But the call of God comes before the mission. First, have you responded to that call?

"Here I am Lord, send me! Whatever, I am yours!"

And the call of God is important, but the vision of God comes before the call. If we forget to cultivate the vision in our souls of who we see God to be and we forget to communicate our awe and wonder of who God is to others, then our own service for God will eventually dry out. Maintaining our first love for Christ, our vision of how wonderful He is, that really is the one thing of first importance. Everything else follows.

Lesson 7 Isaiah 7:1-8:8 The Word to Judah I

Introduction

Isaiah <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>			
Book of the King 1-39			
The Triumph of Grace 6-12			
Prologue: Reconciliation and Commission 6 The death of the king (1a) Responding to the divine holiness (1b-7) Responding to the divine concern (8-10) Responding to the divine purpose (11-13a) The oak tree cut down and life remains (13b)	The King and His People 7-11		Epilogue: Salvation, Joy and Proclamation 12 The prophet addresses an individual (1-2) The prophet addresses the community (3-5)
	The Word to Judah 7:1-9:7(6) The moment of decision (7:1-17) The judgment (7:18-8:8) The remnant (8:9-22) The glorious Hope (9:1-7) {8:23-9:6}	The Word to Israel 9:8(7)-11:16 The moment of decision (9:8-10:4) The judgment (10:5-15) The remnant (10:16-34) The glorious hope (11:1-16)	

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?"

I think the key to this chapter is in recognizing we are not just talking about Ahaz and the failure of a faith test. We are talking about the house of David and whether God's promises to David and Judah have any hope of success among such a faithless people. The king and his people are connected to one another. The people of the northern kingdom Israel have rejected the house of David. Isaiah has a prophetic word for those who are in Israel. Their end is very near. First, he has a word for Judah. Both prophetic messages follow the same pattern. The word for Judah addresses a moment of decision, a judgment, a remnant, and a glorious hope. The word for Israel addresses the same, a moment of decision, a judgment, a remnant, and a glorious hope.

Chapter 5 suggested the failure of God's grace to Judah. They are like a well-tended vineyard that has received protection and provision but yields a harvest of stink-fruit. God's judgment was declared through a series of six woes, at the end of which God whistled for a distant nation to come and take His people into exile. Chapter 5 ends in deep gloom. Chapters 6-12 do not alleviate our fears for Judah. Even so, we see a light arise. Grace does triumph for a remnant. In chapter 6 we saw atoning grace applied to Isaiah. His sin was removed. And he was invited into a missional relationship with God. At the end of our section, in chapter 12, we will encounter a proclamation of joy and salvation. In between the prologue of chapter 6 and the epilogue of chapter 12, we encounter these two words, one to Judah and one to Israel. We see here judgment. But we also see hope.

In this lesson we will address the first half of the word to Judah, which includes a moment of decision and a judgment. We will take these two parts in turn, starting with the moment of decision in Isaiah 7:1-17.

Moment of Decision (7:1-17)

¹ Now it came about in the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Aram and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not conquer it. ² When it was reported to the house of David, saying, "The Arameans have camped in Ephraim," his heart and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind.

That can get a little confusing. Let me explain who we have here before we keep going. We have a series of three names: three people and three places. All three people are kings. All three places are regional neighbors. The first name is Ahaz. He is the current king of Judah. His father was Jotham. We have skipped over his reign. His grandfather was Uzziah, the leper king whose death was reported in 6:1. Next we have Rezin the king of Aram. Aram is north of Israel. Its capital is Damascus. The third name is Pekah the king of Israel. Sometimes Isaiah calls him "Pekah the son of Remaliah." Sometimes

Isaiah does not even bother with his name and just calls him “son of Remaliah.” To add to the confusion, we encounter here a reference to Ephraim. The first king of Israel came from the tribe of Ephraim. Ephraim was a son of Joseph. Jacob places his hands on the head of Ephraim at the end of Genesis, conferring on him the blessing of the firstborn. But the prophecies at the end of Genesis declare that “the scepter shall not depart from Judah.” Through Old Testament history we see these tribes paired together, sometimes positively as with Joshua and Caleb, but also negatively as with Jeroboam of Ephraim who leads the northern kingdom in its breakaway from Rehoboam, Solomon’s son. So, when you read “Ephraim” in the prophets, it is usually another way of referring to the kingdom of Israel. And that might be included here but Ephraim was also the tribe whose land was right across the border from Judah. So, if these kings are gathering their forces in Ephraim, it means they are gathering them on the border.

So for our present story, we have this series of names: Ahaz, Rezin, and Pekah - King of Judah, King of Aram, King of Israel, whose capital cities are Jerusalem, Damascus, and Samaria. Ahaz of Judah rules from Jerusalem; Rezin of Aram rules from Damascus; and Pekah of Israel rules from Samaria. We also get our first reference in this passage to the house of David. That might not catch our attention at first, but it does become important. This story is not mainly about Rezin or Pekah. This story is about Ahaz of the house of David. Even though the kings of the North have gone through several different dynasties in their leaders, the house of David has always ruled in the South. We have always had a descendant of David.

The two kings Rezin and Pekah have made an alliance against Judah. And “When it was reported to the house of David, saying, ‘The Arameans have camped in Ephraim,’ his heart and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind.” Along with his people, Ahaz is afraid. At the end of chapter 6 the king was like “an oak tree cut down.” Here, the king and his people are “a forest shaking in the wind.” That way of linking the two passages together with a word or phrase is the kind of artistic touch we see throughout Isaiah.

Alright, that’s the set-up. Let’s keep going, verses 3-17.

³ Then the LORD said to Isaiah, “Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller’s field, ⁴ and say to him, ‘Take care and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted because of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands, on account of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. ⁵ ‘Because Aram, *with* Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you, saying, ⁶ “Let us go up against Judah and terrorize it, and make for ourselves a breach in its walls and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,”

⁷ thus says the Lord GOD:

⁸ “For the head of Aram is Damascus
(now within another 65 years

⁹ and the head of Ephraim is Samaria
If you will not believe,

“It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass.

and the head of Damascus is Rezin
Ephraim as a people will be shattered)

and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.
you surely shall not last.” ’ ”

¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ “Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make *it* deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!”

¹³ Then he said, “Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? ¹⁴ “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵ “He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good. ¹⁶ “For before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. ¹⁷ “The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father’s house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria.”

God has in mind a test of faith for Ahaz. Isaiah serves as God’s spokesman. He is given some pretty nice directions; where to go, to the pool and the fullers’ highway. He is told to take his son with him and go meet Ahaz, who is apparently inspecting a water source prior to the possibility of invasion from the North. The presence of Isaiah’s son helps tie together the whole passage that is this word to Judah. We have Isaiah’s son in verse 3, a son named Immanuel in verse 14 (that’s awesome!), and a second son of Isaiah later in 8:3. Isaiah has named his son, “Shear-jashub,” which means, “a remnant shall return.” That name expressed two aspects of the message God entrusted to Isaiah. Judgment is implicit in the idea of return. Return from what? Well, from exile. Hope is communicated through belief that some will survive the exile, that there will be a remnant.

God’s message to Ahaz here begins with a bit of trash talk against the two kings Rezin and Pekah. “Don’t be afraid of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands just because they burn with anger.” My Bible says the anger of these two kings is “fierce.” In the Hebrew it is literally “fiery anger.” They may be fiery in their anger, but God says they are smoldering stubs. Do not fear them.

The theme here is faith. The message is similar to the one God gave Joshua when he prepared to enter the Promised Land. “Do not be afraid. Be strong and courageous.” Trust God, Ahaz! Do not fear what these two men plan to do.

This test is serious. There is real danger. These nations are of comparable size. And two of them have now teamed up against the one. And they are not planning a simple hit-and-run raid into Judah. They plan to breach the walls of Jerusalem and set up some puppet king named, Tabeel. They plan to overthrow the house of David. That is a mistake on the part of Israel. God might allow a raid against His wicked people Judah. A plan to remove David from the throne of Jerusalem, however, is an attack on the promises of God. This test of faith calls on Ahaz to remember who he is and to remember who God is, and to remember the promises to the house of David.

There is a chiasmic structure to God’s words in verses 7-9. The outer lines, that is the first line and the last line, parallel one another in thought. Then the inner lines parallel one another. And we have a final line alone in the middle. The first outer line communicates a definitive word from God about this conspiracy to remove the house of David from leadership over Judah.

⁷ thus says the Lord GOD: It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass.

I think this is where Gandalf got his famous phrase from, “You shall not pass!” That’s all I can think about. It shall not stand. It shall not come to pass. That’s good news. But it does not guarantee security for Ahaz, because the last line declares,

^{9b} If you will not believe, you surely shall not last.

That line is not definitive. It is conditional. Ahaz’s position depends on his faith. Aram and Israel will fail. But Judah is not safe. Another judgment may fall on them if Ahaz refuses to believe God. The two inner lines simply define who the conspirators are.

^{8a} “For the head of Aram is Damascus	and the head of Damascus is Rezin
^{9a} and the head of Ephraim is Samaria	and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.

The central line ignores Aram and declares the fate of Israel, the Northern Kingdom.

^{8b} (now within another 65 years Ephraim as a people will be shattered)

That is not a conditional word. That is a definitive word. Ephraim will be shattered. Sometimes prophecy is precise (“in 65 years”). But it’s not always easy to know what it is being precise about. Further to the North, past Aram, the growing empire of Assyria is preparing to pounce, first on Aram as it moves South, and then on Israel. The Assyrian siege of Damascus began in 734 BC. If this year is prior to that, if this is 735 BC, the 65-year span of time mentioned here is from 735 BC to 670 BC. That seems to miss the fact that Israel was overrun, Samaria destroyed, and the people carried off to exile in 722 BC. That would be in 13 years, not 65 years. Though something significant did happen at the end of the 65 years. Esarhaddon, the next king of Assyria, imported foreign settlers into Israel. The poor Jewish remnant that had remained in the land intermarried with these foreign settlers and eventually

took on new religious customs. That's why in Jesus' day the people of this region, the Samaritans, were not recognized as fellow Jews. We cannot know for sure without asking God for an explanation, but when we recognize that the removal of Jews from northern Israel included both an exile of Jews out and an importation of foreign peoples in, then the 65-year time frame works out rather well.

To summarize what we have here, Aram and Israel planned to overthrow Judah. God, however, communicated to Ahaz that He would protect Judah and overthrow the two attacking kingdoms. Judah would be protected now. And the further security of Judah would depend on a response of faith from Ahaz. This is the moment of decision. Isaiah has set before Ahaz a test of faith. He has received a message that he can choose to believe Him or not. Isaiah provides him with a way to show his faith by asking for a sign. Listen to the test again, because at first we might think Ahaz is responding appropriately.

Test

¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make *it* deep as Sheol or high as heaven." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!"

Do you hear Ahaz? "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" What is he saying? That could be a sincere faith response. Jesus rebuked Satan with similar words from Deuteronomy, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test (Deuteronomy 6:16)." But that's not what is going on here. We can tell from Isaiah's response. He is going to say, "Would you try the patience of God?" This is a test of faith to Ahaz but Ahaz ends up testing God. This can be tricky when we interpret Biblical narrative. People say and do things that could reflect faith or faithlessness. It depends on what is going on inside of them, and we are often not told that in the narrative. Instead, we are supposed to pick up information on their internal state from the response of God or from the consequences of their actions. Isaiah's immediate rebuke of Ahaz reveals to us the state of heart. You might even notice that, when Isaiah first communicated to Ahaz, he said, "Ask your God for a sign." But then, when Isaiah rebukes him he says, "Would you try my God?" Ahaz is not showing that God is his God. Isaiah sees right through his false humility. "Far be it from me to test God."

That's a cop out. That's what that is. If we were to go read 2 Kings 16, we would see the corruption of Ahaz's spirit. He already knows what he is going to do. In fact, he has already done it. He has sent a messenger to Tiglath-Pileser, inviting the Assyrian king to attack Aram and Israel. Ahaz does not want to hear what Isaiah has to say. He does not want to open himself up for a word from God that will go contrary to the foreign policy he has already chosen. He also does not want to look like he is rejecting Yahweh. His "far be it from me to test God" is a smoke screen to make him appear faithful while he follows his own strategy. He is not praying over this.

Following the plans of his own heart, he will go from bad to worse. He rejects this offer from Isaiah, God's messenger. In a year's time, Tiglath-Pileser will defeat Aram and will march into Damascus and will set up an ornate altar to an Assyrian god. Ahaz will become so enamored with the power and pageantry of the victors that he will order a copy made of that altar to be placed in Yahweh's Temple in Jerusalem. He will move God's bronze altar to the side. And he will himself consecrate this new, better, more, I don't know, technologically, spiritually advanced altar himself. He will sacrifice in the Temple. And this is the way, when we grow up in a culture and we have this traditional religion that we just kind of, sort of play with but we are not really sincere about it. That is going to give way to a more dominant or popular cultural expressions of spirituality. What's the spirituality that really works in life? What's the spirituality here of military victory? Ahaz rejects the word of God to become a spiritual innovator.

That is all going to happen later. We have to go to 2 Kings to read it. What Isaiah is telling us about here is the moment of decision. Ahaz was given a choice. He chose to refuse God's offer.

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?"

God was not asking Ahaz to give up his reign to the prophet Isaiah. Faith does not mean simple, blind obedience without thought or question. Faith does, however, require an attitude of simple trust. Ahaz refused to trust.

I do not want to make light of the difficulty of Ahaz's position. I will never come close to leading a nation. And I will never have a task anywhere near as challenging as developing foreign policy in the Middle East. I think the significance of Ahaz's position is highlighted by the fact that God sent Isaiah to him. God raised up a prophet to speak His words directly to Ahaz precisely because of the significance of his spiritual leadership as a son of David bound up in difficult times.

I know that I will never approach this level of responsibility. I am struck, however, by the basic attitude God requires from Ahaz. The basic response of faith is true for all of us no matter what level of spiritual leadership or influence we are called to perform. We all start the same. Whether you are called to lead a Bible study, lead as a Mom or Dad at home, lead a task or committee at work, lead in worship, lead in government, whatever the environment, whatever the scope the beginning of wisdom for whatever faces you, whatever is immediately in front of you, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Job 28:28; Ecclesiastes 12:13). That's in Proverbs, that's in Job, that's in Ecclesiastes. That's the wisdom literature. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. And we saw this in Isaiah. We start with a vision of God. And when we are overwhelmed by who God really is, then that pulls out a response. Isaiah's experience works for all of us. God asks, "Who shall I send?" We who believe respond, "Here am I. Send me! Now, where did you say we are going?"

Whatever the job, whatever the mission, that's always the first step with God. We express our trust, our dependence on Him. This does not mean that God is going to take over and do everything for us and make all the decisions. It does not mean we stop planning, stop using our mind and expertise. God expects His servants to give what they have to the task: their gifts, their knowledge, their experiences. Faith does not equal irresponsibility. Faith does not remove the spiritual leader from the equation. Faith does not take away hard work. Ahaz has been invited to focus on God. In the midst of this scary, challenging situation, take a deep breath, remember who you are as son of David, remember who God is - King over all nations - and express your dependence on Him. God wants to reassure you in this, Ahaz. God didn't even wait for you to come to Him. God sent Isaiah to you. Ask for a sign, so that you might be fully reassured that God stands for you against these invading kings. Ahaz refused the offer. God gave a sign anyway. Verses 14-17.

Sign

¹⁴ "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵ "He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good. ¹⁶ "For before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. ¹⁷ "The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria."

A faith sign communicates something true about who God is. Sometimes miracles serve as signs that affirm the word of God. God gave Moses that kind of sign when He turned his staff into a serpent. Jesus' healing of a blind man was called a sign, not only because the sign confirmed the word of Jesus, but also because the sign itself communicated that Jesus is the source of truth, the light of the world who enables true sight. A sign can also stand as a marker reminding us that God has accomplished what He said he would do. That is the kind of sign God gave Moses when He told him, "This shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." God tells them what's going to happen. And when it does happen, it is a sign. When they eventually arrive back at the mountain where God first called Moses, that would be a sign to them that God accomplishes exactly what God says He will accomplish.

The sign in Isaiah 7:14 is like this last kind of sign. People will look at this child and be reminded, when he reaches a certain age, that God said something would come to pass by that time. And they

will see that it has come to pass, and they will see that God keeps His promises. But I think there is more to this child as a sign than that.

Let's start with what God said would happen. This is the clear part of the prophecy. The two kings you dread, that is Aram and Israel, Rezin and Pekah, will be forsaken. "Forsaken" is a strong term when applied to Israel. God will no longer protect Israel. That may sound sad to us, but it would sound like good news to Ahaz. Even though Ahaz did not ask for a sign, God affirms His word that Ahaz need not worry about these two stubs of a firebrand.

Unfortunately for Ahaz, he will probably give himself credit for figuring out how to deal with Aram and Israel. And God helps those who help themselves, right? Well, the second outcome is not so positive for Ahaz. The Lord will bring on Judah such days as they have not seen since the nation was torn in two. That sounds bad.

When will these outcomes come to pass? That's more difficult to say. It will happen by the time the boy is old enough to refuse evil and choose good. That sounds like a jab at Ahaz who has just chosen evil over good. Ahaz does not have the excuse of being a little toddler. But when does a little boy have the ability to refuse evil and choose good? Some would say as late as 12 or 13. You know, when they are on the verge of becoming an adult. If that is the time period, then the prophecy will have become fully true with Aram and Israel defeated by Assyria and the Assyrians having overrun the land of Judah. That will all be true in 13 years.

I have trouble believing we need to wait for 12 or 13 before a child knows how to choose between good and bad. I remember a clear incident over a plate of broccoli when my oldest daughter was 1 and a half years old. I made it very plain to her that she would be punished if she continued to throw her broccoli on the floor. She took the opportunity to stare me down. I mean, she locked eyes and held that broccoli out and dropped it. In some basic way, she knew she was choosing rebellion over submission. The 1 and a half year time frame would also work, since the initial defeat of Aram and Israel will have taken place by this point. So, depending on how you take the comment about refusing evil and choosing good we have a range of about 1 and a half to 13 years.

We also have to ask, who is the child? Some have suggested we are not talking about a particular child, but all children about to be born in Judah. They take the name "Immanuel" to be a collective. A problem with that interpretation is that it does not prove to be much of a sign to Ahaz. And the point of this faith encounter with Ahaz seems to indicate the sign will be knowable and impressive.

Another suggestion is that the child will be Ahaz's child. And that seems a more likely possibility. We are concerned with the house of David. But we do not have confirmation in the immediate context and the child cannot be Ahaz's son Hezekiah, because he is already about six years old by the time of this encounter. Does a child of Ahaz fit the kind of sign that we might expect from the language?

And considering some of the language of the text, there is mystery around this child. So, the sign was to be as deep as Sheol and high as Heaven. His name was to be "Immanuel," which translates, "God with us." There is no reference to a father. He is born of a virgin. There is some mystery here.

There has been a challenge among scholars about the translation of the word, "virgin," in this text. My Croatian Bible and all my English versions say "a virgin will be with child and bear a son." My NASB does have a note beside "virgin" that says, "or maiden." That's the alternative, "a maiden will be with child and bear a son." There is another Hebrew word that specifically means "virgin." Isaiah did not use that word. He did use the word, "maiden." We have to be honest about that and not make the word mean what we want it to mean simply because we have this long tradition of translation. But I do not think that is what our modern translations are doing. Even though the word in Hebrew is "maiden," I believe the definition of the word includes "virgin." We might explain it this way. The Hebrew word used here means more than just virgin, but it does not mean less than virgin.

English used to use the word "maiden" more frequently. The word has really dropped out of our vocabulary. I think the only place we see it kind of regularly is in a wedding. We have bridesmaids, and that refers to the young women who stand around a bride at her wedding. I don't know if

anybody does this anymore, but it used to be customary to differentiate between a maid of honor and a matron of honor. She is called a “maid” if unmarried and “matron” if married. An old maid would be an older unmarried woman. The distinction still exists to a degree in Croatian. “Djevojčica” is a little girl. “Djevojka” is an unmarried young woman. And “djevica” is a virgin. I asked a friend in preparation for this. If a young woman today of 17 or 18 years old got married, would she still be a “djevojka.” And my friend said, “No, no. She would be a ‘žena.’” When you become married, you become a “žena.” It’s a general term for “woman,” but it has an implication in that case of being a married woman.

So, though it is no longer true in much of society, in older times the word “maiden” in English, or “djevojka” in Croatian was understood to refer to a virgin, because the girl was by definition not married. You don’t use the word “maiden” or “djevojka” for a married woman. And if you were not married in those times, you were not sexually active. That’s the assumption behind the meaning of the word. And that assumption was certainly true for how Isaiah would use the language. He would not have used this word if he was speaking of a sexually active woman. He would have used the word for “wife.” Maidens do not have children. At least, not without scandal. The woman being referred to here is understood to be a virgin.

When Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 in reference to Mary, he does not use the Greek word for “maiden.” He uses the Greek word for “virgin.” That’s in Matthew 1:23, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son.” We might be a little skeptical and we might say that Matthew is knowingly changing the word to virgin to fit the Christian belief that Mary was a virgin. But what Matthew is actually doing is quoting from the Septuagint. He doesn’t really translate the Greek. He uses the accepted Greek translation of the Jewish Bible that Jews are familiar with. We are not sure exactly when the translation of Isaiah was produced. It’s likely more than a hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and it was produced by Jewish scholars. Those Jewish scholars chose to use the Greek word for “virgin” when they translated this Hebrew word, affirming the decision to continue to use the word “virgin” in our modern translations, especially if we no longer assume that maidens are virgins.

Now we have something very curious going on. This sign seems to refer both to a real child that will soon be born, and also to a much more mysterious child who has no father, who fulfills the wonder of a sign that might descend to Hell and reach to Heaven, who is born of a virgin and whose name is Immanuel. Which of these two options is primary? Is Isaiah speaking of an immediate child or a future child? What is the correct interpretation? How do we decide between the two?

I am not sure we are going to have to decide. Sometimes Hebrew prophecy includes an immediate, concrete, real fulfillment that is also symbolic of a future fulfillment. The present Immanuel might be a type of the future Immanuel. That is a possibility. We do not want to assume that in this case, just to make our interpretation job easier. We need to ask whether or not the text gives us indication that we should expect both a present and a future fulfillment of this prophecy.

I believe the text does point us in this direction. We have already considered that the baby needs to be a present sign that will soon affirm God’s word to Ahaz. and that the baby is referred to with mysterious language that points to something much more. We also have the curious reality that Isaiah mentions two more children in this prophecy to Judah, the word to Judah. The next child we encounter is a present child born to Isaiah and his wife. He is mentioned in chapter 8. And then, there is another, son of David who will reign forever, mentioned in chapter 9. I definitely lean toward interpreting the sign in 7:14 as having a dual fulfillment in these two later children. I will speak more about Isaiah’s child in a minute and will wait for our next lesson to talk about the future child.

I will say that my opinion is certainly affected by Matthew’s affirmation for us that this verse is definitely talking about Mary and Jesus. I’m not going to disagree with Matthew. And it is only affirmed when you really get into Isaiah and you’re like, “Wow! There is some stuff going on here!”

Outcome

Moving along, Ahaz was given a test that included a sign and an outcome. And just as we have needed to recognize a little bit of complexity in the sign, maybe a dual fulfillment, we also need to recognize a little bit of complexity in the outcome. God had said, "Do not fear these two regional powers. They will not overtake you." Ahaz failed the test. He did not trust God or God's messenger. God still planned to fulfill His word that Aram and Israel would not overcome Judah. But before giving Ahaz the sign, God had said, "If you will not believe, you surely shall not last." Ahaz's decision made a difference. It is not now the time for Judah to be exiled like Israel. That judgment is still future. But Judah is going to suffer as a direct result of the failed spiritual leadership of Ahaz. Leadership matters. Leadership has consequences.

Isaiah explains the outcome of Ahaz's failed faith test in the judgement of 7:18-8:8. I will read that whole passage now and then just make a few comments, since it is mostly a development of what we have already covered.

The Judgement (7:18-8:8)

<p>18 In that day that is in the remotest part of the rivers of Egypt</p> <p>19 They will all come and settle on all the thorn bushes</p> <p>20 In that day the Lord will shave</p>	<p>the LORD will whistle for the fly and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. on the steep ravines, on the ledges of the cliffs, and on all the watering places. with a razor, hired from regions beyond the Euphrates (<i>that is, with the king of Assyria</i>), the head and the hair of the legs;</p>
<p>21 Now in that day</p> <p>22 and because of the abundance of the milk produced for everyone that is left within the land</p> <p>23 And it will come about in that day,</p>	<p>and it will also remove the beard. a man may keep alive a heifer and a pair of sheep; he will eat curds will eat curds and honey. that every place where there used to be a thousand vines, <i>valued</i> at a thousand <i>shekels</i> of silver, will become briars and thorns.</p>
<p>24 <i>People</i> will come there with bows and arrows</p> <p>25 As for all the hills which used to be cultivated with the hoe, but they will become a place for pasturing oxen and for sheep to trample.</p>	<p>because all the land will be briars and thorns. you will not go there for fear of briars and thorns;</p>

¹ Then the LORD said to me, "Take for yourself a large tablet and write on it in ordinary letters: Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey." ² "And I will take to Myself faithful witnesses for testimony, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah." ³ So I approached the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; ⁴ for before the boy knows how to cry out 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria." ⁵ Again the LORD spoke to me further, saying, ⁶ "Inasmuch as these people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah And rejoice in Rezin and the son of Remaliah; ⁷ "Now therefore, behold, the Lord is about to bring on them the strong and abundant waters of the Euphrates, *Even* the king of Assyria and all his glory;

<p>And it will rise up over all its channels</p> <p>⁸ "Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through, And the spread of its wings</p>	<p>and go over all its banks. It will reach even to the neck; will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.</p>
--	---

Isaiah repeats the unique image from 5:26 of God whistling for an invading army to overwhelm Judah. The army would be like the flies of Egypt or the bees of Assyria coming to plague the land of Judah, swarming

up from the Nile or the Euphrates, coming to plague the land of Judah, penetrating into every place imaginable. Isaiah then switches to an image of Judah like a captive man whose hair is shaved off in dishonor. Then we get another reference to curds and honey. The first mention of curds and honey was in connection to the sign of child. That reference was positive, suggesting the luxury of a well-fed baby. Now Isaiah turns the image upside down. The land has been demolished. All a man has to eat is the milk of cows and sheep kept alive by grazing off the land and the honey he finds will be wild. This is not luxury. This is basic sustenance. It's a living off the land. Vineyards and cultivated ground will be overtaken by briars and thorns. The land of Judah has been invaded. Crops are destroyed. People are gone. It's a bit of an apocalyptic desolation.

Isaiah switches back to prose at the beginning of chapter 8 to tell us about how God commanded him to publicly display this prophetic phrase, "Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey." The idea there is that very soon this powerful, quickly moving army is going to sweep in, and booty are the spoils of war, people are the prey. God instructed Isaiah to set up a placard with those words, emphasizing the speed of the coming judgment. The placard will point to two events. First, Isaiah will have a child whose name Maher-shalal-hash-baz is that phrase. That's the Hebrew for, "Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey." I think I would rather have his brother's name, "a remnant will return." It's not always easy being a second child, I guess, especially if your dad is a prophet.

I believe this is the child of the sign. The clock begins to tick at the moment of his birth. The second event we expect is the actual fulfillment of the judgment. The posting of the placard is to be done in a public way such that Uriah and Zechariah, not necessarily faithful men, are able to give public witness to the fact that, "Yes, Isaiah is the one who put this up and he put it up at this time, before his wife had had the child and while Ahaz still thought he was on good terms with Assyria."

Isaiah's wife is here called a prophetess. It is not clear whether this simply indicates she is the wife of a prophet or whether she also at times prophesied. I have also read the suggestion that her birth of this particular child is an act of prophecy in that in the birth God's word is proclaimed through her.

I do realize this child does not fully fit the language given to us about the child who would be a sign. Isaiah's wife has already had one child, so she is not a maiden. Also, this child does not fit the mysterious language of up to Heaven and down to Hell that suggests something particularly spectacular. And we might say this child could not be the one since he is not named "Immanuel." And he certainly will not fulfill the concept of Immanuel like Jesus will. But to be technical, Jesus was not named "Immanuel," either. He was named "Jesus." And though this child is not going to fulfill the meaning of Immanuel as Jesus will, the phrase "God with us" also has specific application for these present circumstances. This child of Isaiah is born in a time when both names could work. We see both truths, "swift is the booty" and also "Immanuel." Judgment is coming, yet God is still with us.

Conclusion

Isaiah concludes, artfully comparing the gentle Shiloah to the mighty Euphrates. The Shiloah was a small stream that brought water into Jerusalem. Saying, "These people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah" is to say they have rejected the Lord's provision. Ahaz is looking to the might of the world. He is looking beyond God. He is despising the smallness of what God has given him. The Euphrates here is literally just called the "River," but whenever the River is mentioned in Hebrew without qualifications in the Old Testament, it is a reference to the river Euphrates. Ahaz turned from God, looking to Assyria for rescue. But that river Euphrates is a treacherous one. Once its course turns towards Israel, there is no containing its waters. After engulfing Aram and Israel,

⁷ ...it will rise up over all its channels and go over all its banks.
⁸ Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through,
It will reach even to the neck;
And the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

This is the dual nature of the judgment. The Assyrians will overwhelm Judah like floodwaters overflowing their banks, like a bird of prey whose wings spread out over the whole breadth of the

land. The cry to Immanuel in this case sounds like a cry, either to the people of the land, or to the king of the land. It will spread its wings over your land, O Immanuel. There is some mystery here about who we are calling "Immanuel." But I think we understand the idea. God is with us. He is with us even as He judges us. And he will not let us not be completely swept away.

When we feel overwhelmed. And the floodwaters rise even up to our neck, God is with us. Even when the pain is our own fault, even when we caused the flood, God is with us. The waters do not rise up over our head. God is with us. There is hope. God is with us. O, Immanuel! God is with us!

Lesson 8 Isaiah 8:9-9:7 The Word to Judah II

Introduction

What sets you apart from all the people around you when the flood waters rise or when the daylight fades to gloom? Even if you are walking in murky night, do you see with the eyes of faith the sure hope of dawn?

Isaiah did. And he recognized that sure hope to be found in a child. At first, the child seems to serve only as a sign of God's presence. He is a mysterious child without father, born of a virgin, who reaches down from Heaven and up from Hell. By his name, he points us to the fact that God is with us, Immanuel. Isaiah does not see the child only as a sign pointing us to our hope in the imminent presence of God. The child himself is God with us. He is our sure hope. He is the dawn. That is the word to Judah manifested to us more fully through the birth, life, death, resurrection and heavenly reign of Jesus Christ. We wait only for Him to return and establish His eternal reign on Earth.

And we see Isaiah's view on this. 700 years before the birth of Christ, we get this amazing prophetic word to Judah that began in our last lesson with a moment of decision and a judgment. Ahaz King of Judah and Son of David made a decision. He refused to trust God. He put his faith in the power and wealth of Assyria. This was his foreign policy, to invite a lion into his backyard to kill two snakes, Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Aram. Isaiah pronounced judgment. Pekah and Rezin would be judged for seeking to overthrow the house of David. Judah would also suffer. The problem of inviting a lion into your yard is that he might not leave. Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria will decide Judah too tasty a morsel to let go. He will flood down into the land like the mighty Euphrates overflowing her banks, like a bird of prey whose wings cover the breadth of the land. Isaiah says it will be devastating, but it will not be final. The waters will rise to the throat, up to the neck but not cover nose and mouth.

In dark and difficult times like these, what sets the faithful apart from the faithless? That's the third section of this word to Judah. We considered section 1: the moment of decision; section 2; the judgment. Now we will consider section 3: the remnant, and section 4: the glorious hope.

There is an important way the remnant is not set apart. The remnant experiences the calamity that falls on the nation, just like everyone else. We do experience blessings in this life as we walk according to God's way. But we also still live in a broken world. We experience tornado and flood, cancer and heart attack along with everyone else. And we experience the evil that people do to one another and the damage in a morally corrupt society. We are not set apart from suffering.

So, what does set the faithful apart? I like the outline Alec Motyer gives to the remnant section.⁹ He recognizes two marks of differentiation, the Lord's presence and a response of faith. Those two things set us apart. The focus on the remnant is in 8:9-22. We will consider first how the Lord's presence differentiates the people of God from all others. That emphasis is in verses 9-15.

The Remnant (Isaiah 8:9-22)

1. The Lord's presence as the point of differentiation (9-15)

⁹ Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered; Gird yourselves, yet be shattered;	And give ear, all remote places of the earth. Gird yourselves, yet be shattered.
¹⁰ "Devise a plan, but it will be thwarted;	State a proposal, but it will not stand, For God is with us."

¹¹For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying,

¹² "You are not to say, ' <i>It is a conspiracy!</i> ' In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy,	And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of <i>it</i> .
¹³ "It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy.	And He shall be your fear and he shall be your dread.

⁹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 92-93.

- ¹⁴ “Then He shall become a sanctuary;¹⁰
To both the houses of Israel,
a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,
a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of
Jerusalem.
- ¹⁵ “Many will stumble over them,
Then they will fall and be broken;
They will even be snared and caught.”

The first two verses establish a differentiation between the peoples of the world and God’s special chosen people. That language is very reminiscent of Psalm 2, a Messianic Psalm. That Psalm begins with peoples scheming against God, rulers taking a stand against the Lord’s anointed king. God does not take them seriously. He laughs at their arms raised up against Him. And He says to His anointed one,

You are My Son,
You shall ^abreak them with a rod of iron,
Today I have begotten You.
You shall shatter them like earthenware.

And God says to the nations,

Do homage to the Son, that He may not become angry,
and you perish *in* the way,
For His wrath may soon be kindled.

How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

Here in Isaiah, the people of God are facing this very reality. Other peoples conspire together to overthrow Judah and remove the anointed son of David from the throne. Isaiah’s message to the peoples of Aram, and Israel, and Assyria, and to all peoples who plan evil against God’s chosen ones.

- ⁹ “Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered;
Gird yourselves, yet be shattered;
And give ear, all remote places of the earth.
Gird yourselves, yet be shattered.
- ¹⁰ “Devise a plan, but it will be thwarted;
State a proposal, but it will not stand,
For God is with us.”

That’s what differentiates the people of God: “For God is with us.” That phrase is literally “for Immanuel” (*kî`immānû`ēl*). God is with us, even when the flood waters rise.

Verse 11 is a bridging pointing both to this truth from God and the next truth from God.

- ¹¹ For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying,

In these dark times, God strengthens Isaiah, giving him prophetic words that are both personally edifying and also useful for Isaiah in his ministry to a small group in Judah who do believe. The phrase, “For the Lord spoke to me with mighty power” includes what we have just read. The flood waters may rise but God is with us. Peoples of the Earth, leaders and people of influence will at times make plans to disrupt the people of God. Sometimes, those threats will not materialize. Rezin and Pekah made plans to topple the throne of David. God thwarted that plan. Sometimes, the plans do go into effect. Tiglath-Pileser did overrun Judah. But his plan to conquer Jerusalem did not stand. God does not prevent threat from the unbelieving world. And he does not always prevent the unbelieving world from making inroads, from causing suffering on His people. The people of God are required to live by faith because darkness, and suffering, and pain do come. This is the word God gives Isaiah as light when things are dark – Immanuel, God is with us.

That distinction is applied to all of Israel. In a special way, the whole people of Israel, faithful and faithless, can claim “God is with us.” The whole Christian Church today can make a similar claim. God is with us. God is with us in His Church. Still, another distinction must be made. In a more particular way, God is with the remnant. There is a people within the people. There is a church within the Church. General promises apply to the institution that is the people of God. Specific promises apply

¹⁰ Alter follows a secondary reading for this verse which does not include the word “sanctuary.” The NASB changes the order of the second phrase, moving it after “two houses.” I have kept both the words and the order of the Masoretic text.

to that smaller group of people who have truly believed in God as their Lord and Savior. The eyes of their hearts have been opened, and they have submitted in faith. They are the remnant. In Isaiah's time that did not include Judah alone. These words are to both houses of Israel, the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom.

- ¹² "You are not to say, '*It is a conspiracy!*'
In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy,
¹³ "It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard
as holy.
¹⁴ "Then He shall become a sanctuary;
To both the houses of Israel,
¹⁵ "Many will stumble over them,
They will even be snared and caught."
- And you are not to fear what they fear or be in
dread of *it*.
And He shall be your fear and he shall be
your dread.
a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,
a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of
Jerusalem.
Then they will fall and be broken;

This is the test of faith Ahaz failed. The people of Judah were afraid, recognizing the reality of threat and suffering. There is real, significant opposition. There is reason to fear. In the reality of that fear, the person of faith is to lift their eyes higher up. They are not to focus on the conspiracies of unbelievers. They are to fix their eyes on the Lord of hosts and to regard Him as holy. Isaiah needs to remember the vision of his calling described in chapter 6. "You have seen God as high and lifted up, whose glory fills the earth. You have seen God as holy, holy, holy." The message to Isaiah now is to remember that; remember who God is. "He shall be your fear and he shall be your dread." Isaiah had experienced that fear in the presence of God. "I am undone. I have seen God. I am a sinner of unclean lips." Isaiah had also experienced the grace of God to atone for his sin. That right dread of God developed into a holy fear that includes awe and gratitude at the holy goodness of God. Isaiah had an understanding of God's intense purity and God's abundant grace that allowed him to be with God in His holy presence with a right fear. He wasn't afraid to be with God. And that is the first phrase of verse 14. If we lift our eyes up, and we have this right relationship, this right fear but also understanding of grace that covers us, "Then he shall become your sanctuary." After you have turned your eyes to Him as the One you should truly fear, He becomes sanctuary for you.

Sanctuary may include the idea of safe haven. Sanctuary in this context primarily means, "a holy place." Those who have seen God with the eyes of faith and submitted to Him as Lord and Savior experience the presence of God in this special way. They are able to be with Him in His holiness. And that further sets them apart. They are the people within the people, or the Church within the Church. I do not mean that there is this kind of super-spiritual, special class of Christian. I mean simply that they are those who have entered into relationship with God through simply faith. In New Covenant language, they are those who have been born again. They have a personal relationship with God, based on receiving His grace through faith.

The first distinction of "God with us" was a general distinction between Israel the chosen people, and the nations of the Earth. This second distinction differentiates between all Jews and those Jews who have truly believed in Yahweh. I do need to be careful applying this distinction to the Church. Using the word "Church" in one way I may refer to everybody who has truly placed their faith in Jesus, to all who have been born again. If that is what I mean by "Church," and it is usually the way I use the word "Church," then my language of Church in a Church does not work here. The idea of Church within a Church is helpful when we think about our social reality. Lots of people in society claim to be Christian. They claim to be part of the Church. In some countries there is a national sense of Christianity, often Catholic or Orthodox. In other countries there are long established Protestant churches. Kids grow up Methodist, or Baptist, or Assembly of God, or Moravian. Lots of people are traditionally or culturally Christian. Using that broad cultural definition of the word "Church," the idea of a Church within a Church becomes a lot more helpful. Jesus expressed the idea in His parable about wheat and tares. Tares are weeds that look like wheat. You do not recognize them as tares until harvest time when you see they don't have any fruit. Sometimes it is quite clear when people

claiming to be a Christian have no real, personal relationship with God. At other times, it is difficult determining whether a person who claims the title “Christian” is truly born again. Jesus’ parable is telling us that we have to live with that ambiguity. You are going to have to wait and let the angels sort that out. At the same time, the parable also affirms distinction. There are wheat and there are tares in our Christian communities.

The majority who are culturally religious will speak as though they believe and yet not yield their heart to God, to walk in the ways of God and so they won’t experience the fruit of God’s holy presence in their lives. God won’t truly be sanctuary to them. In fact, the true vision of God that Isaiah preaches becomes a stumbling block. If you were to preach the simple message of Jesus in many churches today and call people to live in submissive obedience to God’s revealed will in the Bible, that message would trip up a lot of people. A lot of people in church! So, in rejecting the basic Gospel message and in rejecting the basic morality of faith, they stumble and fall even while claiming to be Christian. Isaiah brings together tightly this idea of how God’s presence among His people is either sanctuary or stumbling block.

¹⁴“Then He shall become a sanctuary;
To both the houses of Israel,
a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,
a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of
Jerusalem.
¹⁵ “Many will stumble over them,
Then they will fall and be broken;
They will even be snared and caught.”

These verses make a distinction based on God’s presence. How is the remnant different? The remnant is different because God is with us. He is with us both in the general sense of keeping His promised to Israel and to the Church. He is also with us in the very personal sense of being our present sanctuary, our holy place. We stand with God in grace. Isaiah moves on to a second mark of distinction. In defining that first distinction, I have already talked about the second distinction. It is the response of faith. Isaiah develops that distinction in a contrast between the way of faith and the way of faithlessness. The way of faith is in 16-18 and the way of faithlessness is in 19-22. This is the way of faith, Isaiah 8:16-19.

2. Faith as the mark of differentiation (16–22)

The Way of Faith

¹⁶ Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. ¹⁷ And I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him. ¹⁸ Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

This is the way of faith. The testimony here is the testimony of God, the witness He communicates about Himself and about our reality. Law here is literally “torah,” though the word “torah” has a broader meaning of instruction. Isaiah’s disciples are to bind and seal the words he is delivering from God. They are not to add to, or change the revealed Word of God. They are to act on that word by waiting for the Lord. “Waiting here” is another word for “faith.” It is a patient dependence on God. And I can ask myself, “Is that what faith looks like in me? In dark times and struggling times, do I have this patience, confidence awaiting for God to reveal Himself?” Isaiah says he is waiting while God hides His face. That’s a reference to the punishment about to fall on Israel and Judah. The face of God shines, giving light to those who believe. That light has gone out. God has pulled His presence back. The way of the faithful is to wait and look eagerly even when God’s presence does not seem apparent.

Children here is another way to refer to disciples or believers. In this context, that word also reminds us of Isaiah’s two sons and their prophetic names, “a remnant shall return”, and “swift is the booty, speedy is the prey.” In contrast to Ahaz, who rejected God’s offer of a sign, Isaiah and those who walk with him look for the signs God has promised. They expect wonders from God. They expect God

to do the supernatural. And they are prepared to wait for it during this dark time while God has His face turned away.

This way of faith is contrasted by the way of faithlessness in 19-22.

The Way of the Faithless

¹⁹ When they say to you, “Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,” should not a people consult their God? *Should they consult* the dead on behalf of the living? ²⁰ To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. ²¹ They will pass through the land hard-pressed and famished, and it will turn out that when they are hungry, they will be enraged and curse their king and their God as they face upward. ²² Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and *they will be driven away into darkness.*

Ahaz gave us an example of culturally religious spirituality. He gave lip service to God without submitting to the word of God. “Who am I to ask for a sign? I’m spiritual!” Yeah, but then if we turn over to 2 Kings 16 we see where this takes Ahaz. His way of cultural religion devolved as he adopted what he believed to be superior forms of spirituality defined and practiced outside of Biblical revelation. He was over-awed, not by God. He was enamored by the great king Tiglath-Pileser. He exchanged the word of God for an Assyrian mode of worship, an Assyrian altar to put in God’s Temple.

People do not remain spiritually neutral. We walk with God, or we drift away from God. In this passage, Isaiah challenges the traditionally religious Jews who have made that natural shift away from Biblical practice. They haven’t held tightly to God’s way revealed in Scripture so they naturally kind of shift towards the culture. And they consult mediums and spiritists, because that is what people did in ancient Near Eastern culture. That’s one way to get what you want, to gain power, to gain control, to have insight. Isaiah points to the irony of those who claim to believe in God, and yet they do not seek His face. They seek the dead. The same charge is relevant in our day as people who claim to hold to Christian faith turn to all kinds of alternatives to get the peace, and the joy, and the love promised by God but they are not feeling in their lives. Influencers offer peace, and joy, and satisfaction through a plethora of options. You can choose it through Buddhism or angels, through yoga or minimalism, through good health or self-acceptance, through relationships or job success, through defining yourself however you want to define yourself, through traveling around the world, through saints or horoscope, through the convenience and safety of a perfectly tuned automated home monitoring system. Peace, joy, and satisfaction are yours: just try this.

Ok. With some of those things there is definitely some good mixed in. So I’m not trying to trash everything that our culture offers. But even if we were to take all the best parts of cultural practices, it is not possible to experience the fruits of an abundant life without orienting your life around patient faith in God and consistent obedience to His Word.

I think, especially at Christmas time, people want the fruit of abiding of Christ. They want love, they want joy, they want peace, they want hope. But they don’t want to do the work of abiding in Christ: consistent faith; to love God through obedience; to be in His Word; to depend on the Holy Spirit. And there are others, who are striving to do these right religious things, the religious works of abiding to get the joy and peace and love, but they are missing the heart. It has got to come back to this patient faith, this awe of God, this loving gratitude for God. And it really is in that order. You want love, and joy, and peace, you want that kind of fruit, it starts in a heart of faith. It starts in the heart. But then it requires some action, some consistent obedience, some being in the Word, some patient waiting. And that is going to result in the fruit of the Spirit. When we hold on kind of this cultural religiosity and things are dark or troubling, whether outside of us or inside of us, then we are naturally set up to look for spiritual forms or ways to get satisfaction in the culture, outside and apart from the Word of God.

Isaiah calls the people of God back to the way of faith. "To the law and to the testimony!" Those who refuse to trust God have no dawn. They cannot walk with the eyes of waiting faith that see ahead to a new day. They do not hope in the realization of God's plans and the triumph of grace. They pass through the land of Judah downtrodden. The suffering they experience is also experienced by the faithful, but unlike the faithful, when they look up from their suffering, they do not receive comfort from God. They shake their fists in bitterness. Having spent their energy cursing God and cursing king – "It's God's fault! It's the politicians' fault! Life sucks!", and they gaze and turn downward again in despair. "Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and *they will be* driven away into darkness."

The difference of being in personal relationship with God, experiencing His presence and responding in faith, shows up in dark time. The remnant hopes. The rest despair.

Isaiah shifts now to speak about the glorious hope of the faithful. This is one of the most important Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. I am reading from Isaiah 9:1-7. The verse numbering is different for Bible versions that follow the Hebrew numbering. In the Hebrew numbering the first verse of chapter 9 is the last verse in chapter 8. The text is all the same. It just changes, kind of, the verse numbering. I know this is true in the Croatian text. I don't know about your language. What I am reading in the English as 9:1-7 may be for you as 8:23-9:6. But it's still all the same words.

The Glorious Hope (9:1-7)

¹ But there will be no *more* gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make *it* glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

² The people who walk in darkness
Those who live in a dark land,

Will see a great light;
The light will shine on them.

³ You shall multiply the nation,
They will be glad in Your presence
As men rejoice

You shall increase their gladness;
As with the gladness of harvest,
when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For You shall break the yoke of their burden
The rod of their oppressor,

and the staff on their shoulders,
as at the battle of Midian.

⁵ For every boot of the booted warrior
in the *battle* tumult,

And cloak rolled in blood,

will be for burning, fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child will be born to us,

a son will be given to us;

And the government will rest on His shoulders;

And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor,

Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ There will be no end to the increase of *His*
government or of peace,

On the throne of David and over his kingdom,

To establish it and to uphold it

with justice and righteousness from then on and
forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

I love that! That's awesome! As a Christian it is hard to read verse 1 without immediately thinking about Jesus growing up in the town of Nazareth located in this northern region of Israel.

But there will be no *more* gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make *it* glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

There is connection between these regions and the international conflict Judah is currently caught up in. Naphtali extended the territory of Israel to its furthest northern border on the west side of the Jordan river. Zebulun was to the southwest of Naphtali. These regions, along with Gilead, which was on the east side of the Jordan river, were the first to fall to the Assyrians. They were the first Jews to suffer exile. And they were treated with contempt. They were not protected. And they were

incorporated into that empire as three Assyrian provinces. Motyer believes these three territories are what is meant by the three phrases, “the way of the sea,” “the other side of Jordan,” and “Galilee of the Gentiles.” The same provinces that were first put to shame will be later made glorious through the ministry of Jesus Christ.¹¹ He spends most of His time in Galilee.

We should also note the reference to “Galilee of the Gentiles.” And though the region around the Sea of Galilee always did include a mixture of Jew and Gentiles, no other references in the Old Testament to Galilee emphasize the Gentile population. It’s just called “Galilee,” not “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Isaiah, as is his practice, is including Gentiles into the new hope, just as he included Gentiles in his vision of New Jerusalem back in chapter 2.

The way Isaiah describes this glorious hope reminds me of the prologue to the Gospel of John. John starts with two great mysteries of Biblical faith. He starts with the mystery of the Trinity, “The Word was with God, the Word was God.” Then he refers to the mystery of the incarnation, that is, God coming into the world, starting with an abstract reference and moving to a concrete reference. The abstract reference is to light, “There was the true Light which coming into the world, enlightens every man.” And from that reference, unless you know the story, you don’t know that the true light is coming as a human being. The light is in the world. You know, what is that light? Is that a spirit? Is it just truth? The concrete reference reveals this, “The word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory (John 1:9, 14).”

I wonder if John took his cue from Isaiah, who speaks first of this glorious hope first as a great light, and that’s abstract, we don’t know exactly what that is. But then we see it’s a human child, and in the name of the child there is this allusion to the triune nature we have, again, Trinity and incarnation. We start with the glorious hope described in terms of a great light.

² The people who walk in darkness Those who live in a dark land,	Will see a great light; The light will shine on them.
--	--

Remember, God has hid His face from Jacob, but you are going to have a great light shine on you. The face of God will shine.

³ You shall multiply the nation, They will be glad in Your presence As men rejoice	You shall increase their gladness; As with the gladness of harvest, when they divide the spoil.
---	---

The people of Judah walk in darkness. Those who believe are looking ahead to the dawn of a new hope. And their hope will be satisfied. A light will arise, and the nation will be blessed. And the joy of the people is expressed metaphorically as being like the joy of people gathering in a fruitful harvest. For a moment you can just stop at the scene of this community, and the harvest is good, and we’re gathering in the grain, and the apples, and the wine, and there’s, just, joy. It’s just a happy day. It is also as the joy of warriors dividing the spoil of a conquered people. Isaiah is using that second metaphor of dividing the spoil in the context of ancient Near East turmoil. It is what the nation of Judah is about to experience. They look like easy pickings to the Assyrians. “Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey.” Isaiah sees the tables turned. And Judah will be victorious.

The next three phrases all begin with the word “for”, each providing an explanation about how the great light multiplies the nation and increases gladness. The word “for” can be read here as “because.” Gladness and prosperity will come because...

⁴ [Because] You shall break the yoke of their burden The rod of their oppressor,	and the staff on their shoulders, as at the battle of Midian.
--	--

The great light brings gladness and prosperity because at the time of its rising God will overcome the oppressor. Motyer points to the three nouns, “yoke,” “shoulders”, and “rod” as evoking

¹¹ Motyer, 99-100.

remembrance of the Egyptian oppression, when the Jews were slaves in that land. He also connects the battle of Midian with Gideon's victory over the Midianites. And when I read Motyer's comments, I thought, how can you know that these words, they all point us back to Gideon and the Exodus? That seems like, to me, you are reaching too hard for a connection. But then when we get to chapter 10:24-26, we are going to see the same three words "yoke," "shoulders," and "rod" in context with the Egyptian oppression (Egypt will be mentioned), and we will see a reference to the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb, which is a clear Gideon reference. So, yes, Motyer is right. This is a reference to the Exodus and Gideon. And though it is like an Easter egg in a movie here, if we miss it, it will be made more clear in chapter 10.

What do the references do for us? Judah's current international crisis is not so severe as to be like slavery in Egypt, but it will become much more like that when Judah is exiled. The reference to Gideon's story links in a number of ideas. When we think of Isaiah telling Ahaz to ask for a sign, we cannot help but think of Gideon, who twice laid out a lamb's fleece and received a sign from God. The Midianites were bringing destruction on the land, just like this great flood Isaiah pictures, it's another connection. In the Gideon story, the affliction from Midian affected the northern tribes with Zebulun and Naphtali being mentioned specifically in the Gideon story, just like we have here at the beginning of chapter 9. And the victory included lights shining in the enemy camp. Maybe that connects, too.

Even with all that, the Gideon reference connects to our current situation predominantly through the idea of an oppressor being removed from Israel by the hand of God. God's zeal is going to do this. Midian boasted an army of 120,000. God would destroy that army in a way that communicated clearly who was responsible for the victory. God is responsible. Nobody believed Gideon had a chance. It was like Greece winning the European Cup in 2004, or the Americans beating the Soviet Union at Olympic hockey in 1980. They didn't have a chance. But those underdog stories don't really capture the incredibly, unbelievable upset of Gideon defeating Midian. God knocked Gideon's army down to only 300 men. 300 against 120,000! That's more like Malta winning the World Cup. No. That's like that lone Chinese man who tried to stand down a tank during the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. Gideon had as much chance of winning as that man did. So, when Gideon won, everyone knew without a doubt that God made it happen.

That's good news for Judah. Anyone in Judah over the next few years would certainly assume the oppressor in this reference, it's not Egypt or Midian, it's Assyria. Assyria will, in fact, reach the walls of Jerusalem during the reign of both Ahaz and his son Hezekiah. And in both cases Judah will be a Gideon-like super-extreme underdog. There is no way the behemoth of Assyria's well trained, massive, iron army fails to take down Jerusalem. And yet, they did fail. Twice. Even so, the oppressor is removed only temporarily. Judah will continue to struggle under the domination of super-power Assyria, then super-power Babylon, then super-power Persia. The yoke does not appear broken. This text seem to promise more, especially as we move on to verse 5.

⁵ [Because] every boot of the booted warrior And cloak rolled in blood,
in the *battle* tumult,
will be for burning, fuel for the fire.

Isaiah is saying that the great light will bring gladness and prosperity because war will end. The breaking of the yoke is so complete, the equipment of war will not be needed anymore. It will be burned up in fire. Is that just a temporary reference? How can war end? That sounds like chapter 2 verse 4.

And they will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.

So, we burn the boots and the cloaks in the fire. Not needed. How is it that the great light ends warfare? How can this be true? The "for" of verse 6 tells us that oppression and warfare end because of this.

⁶ For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;

And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

We've just left the realm of humanly possible. Though we have not left the realm of human. We are talking about the Messiah. We are talking about the throne of David. We are talking about a child, a son who will reign. We are talking about a human being. But how can a human being end war? How can a human being establish and uphold a reign of justice and righteousness that will be forever? A human being cannot. Or I should say, a mere human being cannot. A human being who is also God, can.

And that is exactly where the fourfold name of this human being is going to lead us. This is a child who is also God. This statement truly astounds. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures attribute godhead to their rulers. Not Israel. And certainly not Isaiah, who has beheld the glory of God Almighty. More than once, Isaiah is going to assert the central Jewish truth that God is one. 45:5-6 states this truth emphatically.

⁵ "I am the LORD, and there is no other;
I will gird you, though you have not known Me;
That there is no one besides Me.
Besides Me there is no God.
⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun
I am the LORD, and there is no other,

The prophet cannot be saying this child is God in the sense that the first born of Pharaoh claims to be God. Could these names be symbolic, like the names of Isaiah and his sons, referring to something true about God but not applying to the child? That's a possibility. But that is really not what this sounds like. That's why Jewish theologians are not satisfied with saying these names are only symbolic truths about God. They go to some effort to show a different interpretation, especially for the name phrase, "mighty God."

There are four names here. Some Bible translations list five names by separating out "wonderful" and "counselor." In the Hebrew, the names consist of eight nouns. There are no adjectives here in the Hebrew. The last six nouns are paired with one another through a genitive construction which translates like an adjectives, "Mighty God," "Eternal Father," "Prince of Peace."¹² The first two nouns are not related to one another through a genitive construction, but the parallelism of the Hebrew text requires that we recognize those two nouns as belonging together in the pair "Wonderful Counselor."

"Mighty God" is the name that causes the most consternation for non-Christian interpreters. To give you an example from a Jewish scholar, here is the note that Robert Alter attaches to this verse.

The most challenging epithet in this sequence is 'el giber, which appears to say "warrior-god." The prophet would be violating all biblical usage if he called the Davidic king "God," and that term is best construed here as some sort of intensifier. In fact, the two words could conceivably be a scribal reversal of giber 'el, in which case the second word would clearly function as a suffix of intensification as it occasionally does elsewhere in the Bible.¹³

So he is saying, You know, "el," if we put it on the other side of "giber", "el" which normally means "God," maybe it doesn't mean "God" at all in this case. It's just meant to intensify "giber". So, he's a great warrior, mighty warrior, not God. I find it quite interesting that Alter says, "The prophet would be violating all biblical usage if he called the Davidic king 'God.'" I agree. That's an excellent point.

¹² Motyer, 102.

¹³ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1743.

And yet, he does! That's the problem. I can sympathize with the problem created here for Jewish scholars. How can Messiah be called, God? One solution is to translate the phrase some other way, as Alter does. But as John Oswalt points out, "Wherever *'el gibbôr* occurs elsewhere in the Bible there is no doubt that the term refers to God (10:21; he mentions Deut. 10:17; Jer. 32:18)."¹⁴

We can imagine how a good Davidic king could be a wonderful counselor on the level of Solomon, receiving wisdom from God. And we could conceive of a king being called "father of the nation," though we have to note that Judean kings were not called "father." That was not part of the way they addressed the king. It would be easier to call a Davidic king, "prince of peace," especially if he provided security to the nation during his generation. But there is just no way to make the name "Mighty God" fit a human king. And in the context of this verse, we do not appear to be talking about a symbolic name. It looks like Isaiah is giving us the name of the child. Like Moses gave us the name of God in Exodus 34:6-7. His name is His nature. This is who this child is to be.

Consider the names, starting with "Mighty God." Let's think about it again. Who do you think of when you hear the name, "wonderful counselor?" Does anybody come to mind? Wonderful counselor. When you hear that phrase, what do you think of? Who do you think of when you hear the name, "Prince of Peace?" You know, you're just reading your Bible and you read, "Prince of Peace," who comes to mind first? And who comes to mind first when you hear the name, "Eternal Father?" Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

This is the child who will be born. Mighty God who is also Wonderful Counselor, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. He is one, and He is three. This is both Trinity and Incarnation. The Great Light will enter into the world as a baby and somehow that baby, that man-child, is God.

He does not come to be a baby. He comes as a baby. But this baby boy will grow up to be the King of creation. He will bear the government on His shoulders.

The burden of oppression weighed heavy on the shoulders of the people in verse 4. The strength of this child's shoulders will bear up an everlasting government. There is no hope for humanity in a human king. All human kings fail at some point. The bad ones like Ahaz and the good ones like Hezekiah, all human kings die. Their generation ends. Their peace is forgotten. Who will remove the oppression? Who will end war? The Son of Adam, who is also Son of God. His reign will not be accomplished through human power, or human goodness, or human ingenuity. Isaiah assures us, "The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this."

Like the rescue of Israel from Egypt and like the defeat of Midian's army by Gideon's army of 300, the reign of this child will be established by the passion of God. The word "zeal" is connected to the word "jealous." God is jealous for the redemption of His people. He is not content for them to be oppressed. He is moved by the love in His own nature. God will set things right. God will create a future that has no war. God will bring about joy and prosperity. This is God's plan. God makes it happen. The zeal of the Lord will accomplish these things.

Let's conclude with one thought about application. Having observed this text about the remnant and about the glorious hope of the remnant, who do you personally identify with in the text? That's often a great question to ask, "Who am I in this passage?" There's a child, do I identify with the child? There are people raging, and scheming, and making plans against God. Do I identify with those people? There are religious people who are gonna stumble. And there is a remnant.

I hope you feel that you can identify as one of the remnant, as a disciple of Isaiah. The disciples of Isaiah are marked by the presence of God and a faithful response to Him. Do you experience God as your sanctuary? Do you meet with Him personally, knowing His holiness and knowing His grace? Does something in you respond to the cry, "to the law and to the testimony!"? That is, do you turn to

¹⁴ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 1-39*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 247.

God's Word as your source for understand Him and how to understand living for Him? Do you have a glorious hope in your relationship with God?

The disciple of Isaiah is called by faith to three realities as they walk through dark times. They are called to an experience of the presence of God. They are called to trust the Word of God for instruction and guidance. And they are called to hope in a future dawn.

We live in the wonderful reality of being on the other side of both Christmas and Easter, the birth, the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These earlier disciples of Isaiah saw a great light in the future but they did not see clear distinction between the first coming of the Messiah and the second coming. We have seen the light rise, and we look ahead to the glorious return.

If you are a disciple of Isaiah, this is your gladness and prosperity, to know the presence of God through Jesus Christ our Immanuel, and to know with sure conviction that the Son of David reigns now in Heaven and will come again one day to reign on Earth.

May you deeply experience the peace and joy of God's presence as you faithfully walk with Him.

Lesson 9 Isaiah 9:8-12:6 The Word to Israel

Introduction

Isaiah 9:8-11:16 parallels the message to the Southern Kingdom in 7:1-9:7 by providing a similarly structured message to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Verse 8 begins, "The Lord sends a word against Jacob, and it falls on Israel." We can sub-divide the section in the same way as the word to Judah: a moment of decision in 9:8-10:4, a judgment in 10:5-15, a remnant in 10:16-34, and a glorious hope in 11:1-16.

This passage can be taken as a message particularly for Israel. But we have to adjust a little bit when we think about who Isaiah's audience was. Isaiah was serving in Judah. And the book of Isaiah was put together by the prophet after the exile of Israel. I assume Isaiah originally received this prophetic word for Israel before their defeat and before their exile. I don't know how the message might have been carried to them, if it ever was. I do know that in this current form as part of the book of Isaiah, the audience for this word to Israel is not Israel, it's Judah.

That may change how we understand the message. Not only is it a word to Israel; it is also another warning to Judah. "See what happened to Israel. That could be true of you, Judah. They were demolished and exiled because they turned away from Yahweh. Do not think you are safe just because you live in the city of God and have the Temple of God. If you turn from Yahweh, you can be removed from the land as well."

Read in that way, the message can also be taken as a warning to us. Judah might think, "If Israel fell, we can also fall." We might think, "If Israel and Judah fell, we can all fall." That is not us thinking in terms of individuals but in terms of communities. My local church, my denomination, my Christian movement can fall away from God.

We do not have to think that. It is not automatic. Judah might think, "Well, Israel fell because they never got rid of the idols in Bethel and Dan. We have Jerusalem. We have the Temple. The Messiah comes from us." Judah may have reasons for not believing the punishment that fell on Israel could fall on them. But then what happened to Judah?

We might say something similar. We have centuries of Christian tradition. We have a history of mission work or of revival. We have the true interpretation of the Bible. As Judah presumed themselves better than Israel, we might presume ourselves better than Judah. They rejected the Messiah and were broken off of the olive tree. We accepted Jesus and were rightly grafted in. Well, that may be true. But now what of the generations that follow? Will your church, your denomination, your movement stand because you started with faith in the Gospel? Was it by your own goodness, and your own wisdom, and your own spirituality that you were included in? Does God favor your ethnic group, your denomination, your history, or your missions organization? Is that how you stand? By some special favor because of who you are?

They were excluded because they became arrogant and presumed upon their position. They forgot that God chose them based on His mercy and that they received His grace based on faith. If your community forgets that, too, your church - your movement, your denomination - will be cut off. There might be a remnant of believers left in any given community, but God will not stay to bless a people that denies His Word and rejects the Gospel of grace. God does not stick with dead institutions. God keeps moving. His people follow Him. They respond to Isaiah's call, "to the Word and to the testimony!" They flock to His banner.

That was the point of Paul's olive tree metaphor in Romans 11:19-25, and it gives us some practical context for how this word to Israel applies to us today,

¹⁹ You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²² Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness,

if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural *branches* be grafted into their own olive tree? ²³ For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery – so that you will not be wise in your own estimation...”

Just as Judah is not to feel superiority over Israel and so presume on their relationship with God, so, too, we are not to feel superiority over the Jews or over other Christian movements that may have left the Gospel. Just as they were broken off historically, so, too, might we be. My church, my denomination, my movement will go the same way, if we forget mercy, forget grace, forget faith, forget our first love for Jesus.

As we read this prophetic word to Israel, we should keep in mind first how Judah is to hear this. What is Isaiah saying to Judah by speaking to Israel? That’s the original audience, so they are our interpretive lens. Then, having gained some understanding of the text, we ask, “What does this word to Israel mean for me today? What does it mean for me as an individual and for us as communities of faith? How are we to be rebuked, challenged, directed, encouraged?”

I am going to keep us moving through the text in this lesson. We are covering several chapters, so we need to keep going. We will address this word to Israel with the same structure that we addressed the word to Judah: moment of decision, judgment, remnant, and glorious hope.

The moment of decision (9:8-10:4)

The moment of decision described in 9:8-10:4 sounds more like a pronouncement of judgment. It is. But at each stage of the judgment there is the implicit understanding that, were Israel to recognize the calamity befalling them as God’s discipline, then they could repent and call out to Him. They never do. They ignore God. At this moment of decision Israel turns to belief in their own abilities to overcome and rebuild. Starting in 9:8,

⁸ The Lord sends a word against Jacob,	And it falls on Israel.
⁹ And all the people know <i>it</i> ,	<i>That is</i> , Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria,
Asserting in pride and in arrogance of heart:	

What do they say in the arrogance of heart?

¹⁰ “The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with smooth stones;	The sycamores have been cut down, but we will replace <i>them</i> with cedars.”
--	--

What sounds like this positive, optimistic attitude, you know, “We can rebuild,” is really obstinance. They do not respond to discipline. They plan to rebuild and carry on in their idolatry and immorality.

¹¹ Therefore the LORD raises against them adversaries from Rezin	And spurs their enemies on,
¹² The Arameans on the east and the Philistines on the west;	And they devour Israel with gaping jaws.
In <i>spite of</i> all this, His anger does not turn away	And His hand is still stretched out.

God has removed protection from the nation. Because of their stubborn pride, the smaller nations to their east and west defeat them.

God is not done. As long as Israel refuses repentance, God will carry His chastening on to the end. “His anger does not turn away and His hand is still stretched out.” That phrase serves as a refrain in this section, being repeated at the end of each of the four stanzas that make up this moment of decision. The phrase also recalls the image in chapter 5 where the same phrase depicted God as a King of Kings on the field of battle commanding His troops forward. “His anger is not spent, his hand is still stretched out,” as He points a foreign nation towards Judah. That imagery applies here against Israel.

Following national disaster in the first stanza that comes by the hands of regional neighbors, Isaiah next describes political collapse. The leadership of Israel is undermined. Society suffers. Notice the reference to the elder, the so-called honorable man, and the prophet.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>13 Yet the people do not turn back to Him
 who struck them,
14 So the LORD cuts off head and tail from Israel,
15 The head is the elder and honorable man,
16 For those who guide this people are leading
 <i>them</i> astray;
17 Therefore the Lord does not take pleasure
 in their young men
 For every one of them is godless and an evildoer,
 In <i>spite of</i> all this, His anger does not turn away</p> | <p>Nor do they seek the LORD of hosts.

<i>Both</i> palm branch and bulrush in a single day.
And the prophet who teaches falsehood is the tail.
And those who are guided by them are brought
 to confusion.
Nor does He have pity on their orphans or
 or their widows;
And every mouth is speaking foolishness.
And His hand is still stretched out.</p> |
|---|---|

The collapse, begun at the top with elders and prophets, infects the whole of society. Every one of them is godless and an evildoer. Every mouth speaks foolishness. In spite of this political collapse, God is not done. His hand is still stretched out. Next, society will turn in on itself: brother against brother, tribe against tribe.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>18 For wickedness burns like a fire;
 It even sets the thickets of the forest aflame
19 By the fury of the LORD of hosts the land
 is burned up,</p> | <p>It consumes briars and thorns;
And they roll upward in a column of smoke.
And the people are like fuel for the fire;</p> |
| <p>No man spares his brother.</p> | |
| <p>20 They slice off <i>what is</i> on the right hand
 but <i>still</i> are hungry,</p> | <p>And they eat <i>what is</i> on the left hand
 but they are not satisfied;</p> |
| <p>Each of them eats the flesh of his own arm.</p> | |
| <p>21 Manasseh <i>devours</i> Ephraim,</p> | <p>and Ephraim Manasseh,
<i>And together they are against</i> Judah.</p> |

In *spite of* all this, His anger does not turn away And His hand is still stretched out.

God is not done. Next, the morality of the nation will become corrupted.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1 Woe to those who enact evil statutes
2 So as to deprive the needy of justice
 So that widows may be their spoil
3 Now what will you do in the day of punishment,
 To whom will you flee for help?
4 Nothing <i>remains</i> but to crouch among the captives</p> | <p>And to those who constantly record unjust decisions,
And rob the poor of My people of <i>their</i> rights,
And that they may plunder the orphans.
And in the devastation which will come from afar?
And where will you leave your wealth?
Or fall among the slain.</p> |
|--|---|

Those are your options. You crouch as a slave to be carried in exile, or you fall with the dead.

In *spite of* all this, His anger does not turn away And His hand is still stretched out.

National disaster, political collapse, social anarchy, and moral perversion¹⁵ all together communicate to Israel, “God has given you over because of your sin.” The calamity fallen upon Israel creates a moment of decision. If they would repent, they could find refreshment in God. But they will not. Twenty kings have ruled in Israel. Not one turned away from the idols set up by the first king in the towns of Dan and Bethel. The whole society continues headlong towards final destruction. God does not relent in His anger. His hand remains stretched out.

The judgment (10:5-15)

Final judgment will come in the form of Assyria. Israel will be sent into exile. The judgment section begins this way in 10:5-6.

¹⁵ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 106.

⁵ Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger
⁶ I send it against a godless nation
To capture booty and to seize plunder,
And the staff in whose hands is My indignation,
And commission it against the people of My fury
And to trample them down like mud in the streets.

Much more is said elsewhere of the suffering Israel experiences in the invasion by Assyria. The rest of this judgment section does not, however, focus on Israel. It focuses on the wickedness of Assyria. God may use human beings to execute His will, but if those human beings also prove to be proud and unresponsive to God, they will still be held accountable for their actions even if their actions bring about God's plan. The Assyrians were meant tool to function as a tool in the hands of God, to fight under His banner. They did not see it that way.

⁷ Yet [Assyria] does not so intend,
But rather it is its purpose to destroy
⁸ For it says,
⁹ "Is not Calno like Carchemish,
Or Samaria like Damascus?
Nor does it plan so in its heart,
And to cut off many nations.
"Are not my princes all kings?
Or Hamath like Arpad,

Those six towns are in a line moving from north to south. The first, Carchemish, is furthest north, sitting on the Euphrates. The king of Assyria reasons, "I have taken Carchemish, can I not move south to take Calno? And after Calno to Arpad? And so on, city by city marching down to Israel's capital Samaria? What's to stop me?"

¹⁰ "As my hand has reached to the kingdoms
of the idols,
¹¹ Shall I not do to Jerusalem and her images
Whose graven images *were* greater than those
of Jerusalem and Samaria,
Just as I have done to Samaria and her idols?"

The King understands that every victory is a victory over the god of the defeated people. He has defeated greater peoples which, he reasons, means he has defeated greater gods. The god of Israel will be no problem. And he will not stop there but continue to take Jerusalem and defeat its god.

¹² So it will be that when the Lord has completed
all His work
*He will say, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant
heart of the king of Assyria
on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem
and the pomp of his haughtiness."*

The King of Assyria has not understood that He is but a servant at the feet of Yahweh.

¹³ For he has said,
And by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
And I removed the boundaries of the peoples
And plundered their treasures,
And like a mighty man I brought down *their* inhabitants,
¹⁴ And my hand reached, like a nest,
And as one gathers abandoned eggs,
And there was not one that flapped its wing
to the riches of the peoples
I gathered all the earth;
or opened *its* beak or chirped."

That's the mind of the Assyrian king: I, I, I, I, I, I have done all this. But God says,

¹⁵ Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops
with it?
That would be like a club wielding those who lift it,
Is the saw to exalt itself over the one who
wields it?
Or like a rod lifting him who is not wood.

The king of Assyria is going to get put in his place. He is going to realize who is God. And as with the judgment proclaimed over Israel, this judgment over Assyria is intended for Judah to hear. Assyria will, indeed, defeat and exile Israel. But God wants Judah to know that He is in charge, and He has not given them over to Assyria. Their time is not yet. They will get another chance.

The remnant (10:16-34)

We next come the remnant section in 10:16-34. The remnant section is marked off by four uses of a three-word reference to God: Adonai Yahweh Sabaoth, which my Bible translates as "Lord, the God

of hosts.” The section has two sub-sections with that name, “Lord, the God of hosts,” repeated at the beginning and end of both sub-sections. The whole section directs our perspective toward who is truly sovereign over the affairs of men. A superpower like Assyria naturally believes in its own ability to control the course of events. If you had lived in a superpower, or experienced the might of a superpower, then you know that. America believes it can do what it wants. Russia believes it can do what it wants. China believes it can do what it wants. And these mighty powers can control their own destinies. And exiled or overrun peoples, like Israel or Judah, feel inclined to agree. Who can stop the host of Assyria? Adonai Yahweh Sabaoth.

- ¹⁶ Therefore the Lord, the GOD of hosts, will send a wasting disease among his stout warriors;
And under his glory a fire will be kindled like a burning flame.
¹⁷ And the light of Israel will become a fire and his Holy One a flame,
And it will burn and devour his thorns and his briars in a single day.
¹⁸ And the glory of his forest and of his fruitful garden both soul and body will be destroyed
And it will be as when a sick man wastes away.
¹⁹ And the rest of the trees of his forest will be That a child could write them down.
so small in number

That’s a few lines worth reflecting on if you have time, that’s chapter 10:16-17. Isaiah expertly mixes the metaphors of a man wasting away with disease and a garden burning up by consuming anger. This is divine trash-talking at its best. When we get to chapter 37, we may realize that the prophecy of disease thinning out the ranks of the Assyrian army is not metaphor but reality. That’s what is really going to happen to the army of Assyria. Sickness here is followed by the image of flame, which is followed again by sickness.

We have seen reference before to a light in Israel: a light that will rise up though the people walk in great darkness. The light of Israel in this text is the Holy One of Israel. And here that light burns with consuming anger. Now it’s burning through the forest of Assyria. That forest is Assyria’s army, and it will be so decimated that a child could count them and write down their number.

But what of Israel?

- ²⁰ Now in that day the remnant of Israel, and those of the house of Jacob who have escaped, will never again rely on the one who struck them (that is, Assyria), on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. ²¹ A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. ²² For though your people, O Israel, may be like the sand of the sea, *Only* a remnant within them will return; A destruction is determined, overflowing with righteousness. ²³ For a complete destruction, one that is decreed, the Lord GOD of hosts will execute in the midst of the whole land.

It is the Holy One of Israel who, in his burning anger, exiled Israel and punished Assyria. He is the one who caused destruction, the Lord God of hosts, Adonai Yahweh of Sabaoth. This second use of the three-word name ends the first sub-section. God is sovereign over the affairs of men. The Holy One of Israel will exile his people, and then He will bring back a remnant. There is a seed of hope in the calamity. Tragically, the vast majority of Israelites turned away from God. They were like sand on the seashore. That was God’s promise to Abraham, “I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore (Genesis 22:17).” Out of this great number only a remnant will return.

And even more sadly, the physical return of Israel from exile will not coincide with the spiritual return. We do not see this from the vantage point of Judah looking ahead. We do see this tragic truth from the vantage point of Paul. He quotes Isaiah 10:22 to explain Jewish rejection of the Gospel of Jesus Christ changing Isaiah’s wording of a remnant returning to a remnant being saved. This is Romans 9:27 quoting Isaiah 10:22,

- ²⁷ Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved;

In the prophecy of Isaiah, the future sometimes gets conflated. We do not see some gaps in time when we're looking so far away into the future. We do not yet distinguish clearly between a deliverance from exile and a deliverance from sin. Isaiah will make that distinction later.

Here, Isaiah assures us that the northern people of Israel, though utterly defeated and driven into exile, will not be completely wiped out by the Assyrian menace. There will be a remnant. He next explains what Judah can expect from the threatening superpower. This is the second sub-section of the remnant passage. Like the first sub-section, it also begins and ends with the three-word name of God.

²⁴ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD of hosts, "O My people who dwell in Zion, do not fear the Assyrian who strikes you with the rod and lifts up his staff against you, the way Egypt *did*." ²⁵ "For in a very little while My indignation *against you* will be spent and My anger *will be directed* to their destruction." ²⁶ The LORD of hosts will arouse a scourge against him like the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb; and His staff will be over the sea and He will lift it up the way *He did* in Egypt.

Remember that striking image from 8:7-8 where Assyria is likened to the river Euphrates overflowing its banks and flooding Judah and reaching even up to the neck. Because of Ahaz' faithlessness, Assyria will be allowed to invade Judah. Pain is coming.

Assyria will be like Egypt and like Midian succeeding to some extent in oppressing Judah. This is the imagery used in chapter 9 in reference to the light that will raise in Galilee of the Gentiles. In 9:4 the words "slavery," and "yoke," and "burden" reminded us both of Egypt in the book of Exodus and Midian in the book of Judges. In chapter 9 we looked ahead to the greater deliverance when the son of David sets us free from bondage. Here we look at an important but lesser deliverance. This is the deliverance of Judah from the invading host of Assyria. The language of deliverance from oppression continues.

²⁷ So it will be in that day, that
his burden will be removed from your shoulders and his yoke from your neck,
and the yoke will be broken because of fatness.

Then Isaiah mentions a succession of Jewish towns that depicts the Assyrian juggernaut marching from Israel into Judah, beginning at Ai - or Aith - which is just north of the border. I will not go into the geography. The pass mentioned in verse 29 takes us into Judah. Notice how close we get to Jerusalem.

²⁸ He has come against Aiath, He has passed through Migron;
At Michmash he deposited his baggage.
²⁹ They have gone through the pass, *saying*, "Geba will be our lodging place."
Ramah is terrified, and Gibeah of Saul has fled away.
³⁰ Cry aloud with your voice, O daughter of Gallim! Pay attention, Laishah *and* wretched Anathoth!
³¹ Madmenah has fled. The inhabitants of Gebim have sought refuge.
³² Yet today he will halt at Nob; He shakes his fist at the mountain of the daughter
of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem.

Apparently, Nob is just outside of Jerusalem. He is at Jerusalem, shaking his fist. We will take up this story in more detail in chapters 36-37. Spoiler alert! Our verses here, 33 and 34, are going to give away how that goes for Assyria.

³³ 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.
³⁴ He will cut down the thickets of the forest with iron, And Lebanon will fall by the Mighty One.

Here, the great forest of Lebanon is a picture of the army of Assyria. Isaiah twists around his image of Assyria as an axe that was boasting over the one who wields it. Now Assyria is the forest felled by God's mighty cuts as He lops off branches that fall with a terrible crash. Who is sovereign over the affairs of men? Adonai Yahweh Sabaoth, Lord God of Hosts.

The glorious hope (11:1-16)

We move now into our fourth section of the word to Israel. Isaiah sets before us a glorious hope. Hebrew parallelism rarely simply restates something that has been said earlier. Parallelism provides an opportunity to develop an idea or move forward a narrative. For example, consider the first verse of chapter 11.

¹ Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.

If we read that over quickly, we might think both verses say the same thing. It's identical. But when we look closer, we see that no, there is some movement here. The first verse, "Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse," recalls the image from 6:13 of a holy seed growing out of the cut down stump. That imagery has been used in a similar way to describe the felling of the trees of Assyria. But here, the tree is Jesse, the father of King David, and he has fallen or decayed, but a fresh shoot will spring out. Imagine a little green twig springing up out of the old stump. The next verse moves us forward, "And a branch from his roots will bear fruit." This is not the same as the shoot. It's grown! Branch comes from the verb "to grow green" and implies a stronger state than the original shoot. We see that, because it's bearing fruit. "From his roots" still points back to the human heritage of David. But that bearing fruit shows that he has become strong enough and mature enough to begin to succeed.

That's an example of parallel development on a micro scale moving in the same verse from one verse to the next verse. Isaiah also develops ideas on a macro scale. Consider the two words he has given us in chapters 7-11. We have two distinct messages to two different nations. And yet, when we set the word to Judah beside the word to Israel, we see a parallel structure. The word to Israel does not restate exactly what has already been said to Judah. It develops further similar themes.

In the word to Judah, the moment of decision is with Ahaz, an individual king who must decide whether to trust God or to seek political help from a stronger nation. He seeks aid from Assyria. In the word to Israel, the moment of decision concerns the whole of society, not just the individual person at the head of the society. But like the individual Ahaz, the nation Israel continues to trust in their own wisdom, refusing to turn to God.

In the judgment section of the word to Judah, Isaiah focused on the punishment of both Israel and Judah: the great Euphrates that comes down through them both. In the word to Israel, the judgment of Israel has already been established, so Isaiah develops the idea of God's sovereignty over the Assyrians, who will also experience His judgment even after they are used to carry out His will against Israel.

Moving to the remnant section, the end of chapter 8 focused on a faithful remnant that chose to trust God during days of calamity. That's where we got "To the Law and to the testimony!" They trusted God and experienced Him as their sanctuary. That was a present remnant. In chapter 10 Isaiah speaks about a future remnant that will return to the land after exile.

We do see a major difference between Israel and Judah. Israel's time is up. This is the final curtain call. Judah, however, remains on the stage a little while longer. With these differences Isaiah raises several themes in the first word, and then comes back, using a parallel structure to further develop those themes. It helps to recognize Isaiah's use of restatement to push ideas forward. If we do not, if we move too quickly, then our brains simply see repetition, and get bored and just want to move on. When we hold both words up to one another and we see the parallelism, we can ask, "What's the movement here? What is being added?"

We can do that now with this final section of the glorious hope. How is the Messianic vision of chapter 9 different from the Messianic vision of chapter 11? What does 11 add to the picture?

Early, in chapter 2, Isaiah envisioned a new Jerusalem where a remnant of Jews and an infusion of Gentiles would live with God in peace. That vision cannot come true through the leadership of sinful human beings. The vision of a new community with God requires a new kind of king. Chapter 9

announced a coming king who would be born a human child and yet somehow bear the divine name, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace”. He would break the yoke that presses down on the shoulders of humanity. He would establish a reign of ever-increasing justice and righteousness.

The glorious hope in this word to Israel is a further development of hope for a righteous king. We’ve already considered 11:1. The king will rise up out of the fallen line of David. What kind of king is He? 11:1-5.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ¹ Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, | And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. |
| ² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,
The spirit of counsel and strength, | The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. |
| ³ And He will delight in the fear of the LORD,
And He will not judge by what His eyes see, | Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; |
| ⁴ But with righteousness He will judge the poor,
And He will strike the earth with the rod
of His mouth, | And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth;
And with the breath of His lips He will slay
the wicked. |
| ⁵ Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, | And faithfulness the belt about His waist. |

The Spirit of the Lord rests on this son of David. That does not necessarily mean he is divine. That could be the anointing of kingship. David was anointed by the Holy Spirit. But as we go on, we see that this anointing is combined with wisdom and with spiritual insight. This king delights in the fear of Yahweh. He does not make decisions as most human beings make decisions, based solely on what he sees and on what he hears. The implication is that he sees the hidden things in the soul of man. He understands spiritual reality because he relies on God for wisdom.

The actions of his reign follow from his right relationship with God. He judges with righteousness the poor and the afflicted because he fears the Lord and delights in the fear of the Lord. He will strike the earth and slay the wicked. That will somehow be accomplished with the rod of his mouth and the breath of his lips. His wrath is connected to his mouth and his word.

Verses 6-9 describe a radically new kind of community that he will establish by his reign.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ⁶ And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,
And the calf and the young lion and
the fatling together; | And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,
And a little boy will lead them. |
| ⁷ Also the cow and the bear will graze,
And the lion will eat straw like an ox. | Their young will lie down together, |
| ⁸ 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
For the earth will be full of the knowledge
of the LORD | in all My holy mountain,
As the waters cover the sea. |

I don’t think Isaiah is describing here a literal reordering of nature. I believe this is a metaphorical picture of radical peace among human beings that parallels the earlier vision in 2:4,

And they will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.

This is the hope Isaiah looks forward to in the day of the Messiah’s kingdom – a new kind of human society. He goes on.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ¹⁰ Then in that day
Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; | The nations will resort to the root of Jesse,
And His resting place will be glorious. |
|---|--|

Three things here in verse 10. First, the reference to the root of Jesse forms an inclusio with verse 1 that divides the glorious hope into two sub-sections, verses 1-10 and verses 11-14. Second, the word for “signal” in my translation is the same Hebrew word translated in verse 12 and elsewhere as

“standard” or “banner.” The Messiah will stand as a standard for the peoples. We have seen this image before, but here the context creates a different effect. In 5:25 we were introduced to the language of God stretching out His hand directing a chastising army against Israel. The image of a standard was connected to that image of the stretched-out hand in 5:26.

²⁶ He will also lift up a standard to the distant nation, And will whistle for it from the ends of the earth;
And behold, it will come with speed swiftly.

In that case, the avenging army of Assyria rallied from the ends of the earth to God’s banner to serve as an instrument of God’s justice. Here, the Messiah himself is the standard, the banner. Third, He is a standard for the nations. The “root of Jesse” sounds like a very Jewish king. This Jewish king will be God’s standard under which Gentiles rally to form a new kind of kingdom. In 9:1 the Messiah was depicted as a glorious light rising up in Galilee of the Gentiles. Here, the Gentiles seek out that light and find peace.

The second half of the glorious vision describes the new people of God made up of a Jewish remnant and responsive Gentiles from many nations. The Messiah will establish His reign over all the peoples of the earth, willing and unwilling. 11:11-16.

¹¹ Then it will happen on that day that the Lord Will again recover the second time with His hand
The remnant of His people, who will remain, From Assyria and from Egypt,
And from Pathros and from Cush and from Elam, And from Shinar and from Hamath,
And from the islands of the sea.

The remnant of Jews will return from the far away lands of Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south. Pathros and Cush are even further south below Egypt. Elam and Shinar are further East from Assyria. Hamath is in the far north. The “islands of the sea” speak of distant Mediterranean coastlands. I am reminded of Acts 2 which provides a similar list of scattered Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Like with Acts 2, this gathering of dispersed Jews also points to God’s desire for all peoples to know Him.

¹² And He will lift up a standard for the nations And assemble the banished ones of Israel,
And will gather the dispersed of Judah From the four corners of the earth.
¹³ Then the jealousy of Ephraim will depart, And those who harass Judah will be cut off;
Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, And Judah will not harass Ephraim.

The image of the standard changes just slightly here. Now, the Messiah is not the standard, but He raises up the standard under which believing Gentiles and Jews gather. There is healing among the Jews as the north and south, Ephraim and Judah, come together again under the Messiah’s banner as one.

¹⁴ They will swoop down on the slopes Together they will plunder the sons of the east;
of the Philistines on the west;
They will possess Edom and Moab, And the sons of Ammon will be subject to them.
¹⁵ And the LORD will utterly destroy The tongue of the Sea of Egypt;
And He will wave His hand over the River With His scorching wind;
And He will strike it into seven streams And make *men* walk over dry-shod.
¹⁶ And there will be a highway from For the remnant of His people who will be left,
Just as there was for Israel In the day that they came up out of the land of Egypt.

The language of the past Exodus is taken up to describe a new Exodus. Alter says the image of the tongue of the Sea of Egypt fits the Red Sea, which looks like a tongue. That is looking back to the historical exodus out of Egypt. Men walking over dry-shod fits into that theme as well. The River is, of course, the Euphrates. That is looking ahead to the place of the new exile. Dividing the Euphrates into seven streams probably implies a future perfect re-creation. God will bring His people back from the Assyrian exile just as He once brought them up out of Egypt. And He will form for Himself a new kind of people.

We are going to end with the six verses of chapter 12. It is an exhortation to praise.

Epilogue: Salvation, Joy and Proclamation 12

This short chapter provides a fitting epilogue to our present major section of Isaiah. I have been using Motyer's title "The Triumph of Grace" for chapters 6-12. The prologue of chapter 6 announced the triumph of grace in the life of Isaiah as an individual. He saw a glorious vision of God, he feared his own destruction, by grace God atoned for his sin, symbolized by a burning coal placed on his lips. Chapters 7-11 gave us first a word to Judah and then a word to Israel. On both accounts judgment followed a failed moment of decision. Grace seemed to falter. But destruction will not be absolute. A remnant will respond to God and be saved, a remnant made up of Jew and Gentiles. This will come about through the agency of an ideal King, who is both of the line of David and also Mighty God. We do not know yet how He is going to break the yoke of sin. But we know. But we do know that by gathering to His banner, we can enter into true relationship with God and experience His peace.

We end with an epilogue of praise to God. Isaiah begins by addressing an individual. The "you" in 12:1 is singular.

- ¹ Then you will say on that day,
Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me.
² "Behold, God is my salvation,
For the LORD GOD is my strength and song,
"I will give thanks to You, O LORD; For although
You were angry with me,
I will trust and not be afraid;
And He has become my salvation."

This is the first use of the word "salvation" in Isaiah. We are not yet asking the "how" of salvation. We are praising the "who" of salvation. Yahweh is my strength and song. Yahweh is my salvation!

Isaiah next addresses the community. The "you" in verse 3 is plural, like "y'all."

- ³ Therefore you will joyously draw water
⁴ And in that day you will say,
Make known His deeds among the peoples;
⁵ Praise the LORD in song, for He has done
excellent things;
⁶ Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
From the springs of salvation.
"Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name.
Make *them* remember that His name is exalted."
Let this be known throughout the earth.
For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

This could be Isaiah's personal response to his experience with God in chapter 6. The vision of God overwhelmed him, he knew he must die. Yet, God atoned for his sin and gave him a mission. Imagine Isaiah singing out, "You will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation...for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. The Holy One of Israel is in our midst. We do not cower in the fear of His holiness. We delight in the fear of the Lord because he provides streams of salvation. He is living water. We praise him for all He has done!"

Just as this could be Isaiah's own personal song, this could be your personal response to the grace and mercy of God in your life. We recognize that His justice and His wrath against sin is righteous. And we also recognize that it always includes a call to repentance: if you will just turn around! This song is the song of every true believer, which makes it our song: the song of the community of the faithful.

How does the community of faithful stay connected to God from one generation to the next? How do we heed the warning of these words to Israel and Judah that prideful presumption causes a drift from God? How do we stay connected? We stay connected to God by keeping the vision of His holiness and grace fresh in our hearts and minds. By holding on to our first love for Jesus. And by singing this song. We continually speak of the greatness of God and the godness of Jesus. And we pray that the next generation will come to sing this song, not as tradition. We don't want to hear the same songs sung out of sentimentality or tradition. We want to hear it sung out of the heart. Let them change the music, as long as they sing the same song! As long as they have their own personal experience with the Holy One of Israel.

- ⁴ And in that day you will say,
Make known His deeds among the peoples;
- ⁵ Praise the LORD in song, for He has done
excellent things;
- ⁶ Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
- “Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name.
Make *them* remember that His name is exalted.”
Let this be known throughout the earth.
For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Lesson 10 Isaiah 13-20 The First Cycle of Oracles

Introduction

Isaiah 7-12 showed us the triumph of God’s grace despite the sinful rebellion of His own people. God’s faithfulness to Israel focused in on a new kind of city ruled over by a new kind of king. We caught a glimpse in these chapters of Gentile inclusion into Zion. That’s a picture that needs developing.

How do the nations of the earth fit into the Jewish vision of redemption? What is the right relationship between God’s people and all people?

The question for us has relevance as we think about our relationship with the world in terms of power, economy, organization, strategy, security. When is it right to adopt good practices and ideas from our culture, and when have we gone too far to the point of adopting human values and human wisdom that contradict the values of God’s kingdom, or that replaced trust in God for security with trust in the world for security?

Understanding the relationship between God’s people and all people starts with understanding God’s relationship to all people. God is sovereign over every nation. Isaiah sees no problem prophesying to other nations. He doesn’t just stick to Judah and Israel. And he will prophesy to regional powers and superpowers.

Isaiah		
Book of the King 1-39		
The Universal Kingdom 13-27		
The First Cycle of Oracles The Reality of the Lord’s Promises 13-20	The Second Cycle of Oracles The World in Shadows 21-23	The Third Cycle Two Cities in Contrast: Endurance through to Glory 24-27
N ↑ 1. Babylon (13:1–14:27) Political overthrow	N ↑ 1. The Desert by the Sea (Babylon) (21:1–10) Religious overthrow	1. The city of emptiness (24:1–20) Broken laws (5) Broken gates (12)
W ← 2. Philistia (14:28–32) A Davidic king will yet reign in Zion	↓ S 2. Silence (Edom) (21:11–12) Indefinite continuance of things as they are	2. Zion’s King (24:21–23) ‘After many days’
→ E 3. Moab (15:1–16:14) Moab in need, but through pride refuses shelter in Zion	→ E 3. Evening (Arabia) (21:13–17) Desert tribes in need: no ultimate refuge in mutual security	3. The great banquet (25:1–12) All nations feasted in Zion save Moab, excluded by pride
📍 4. Damascus/Ephraim (17:1–18:7) Strong cities forsaken (9); the forgotten rock (10)	📍 4. The Valley of Vision (Jerusalem) (22:1–25) Strong cities forsaken (9); the forgotten rock (10); the city torn down (10)	4. The city of God (26:1–21) The strong city (1); the everlasting rock (4)
↓ S 5. Egypt (19:1–20:6) Co-equal membership; Egypt, Assyria and Israel (19:24–25)	W ← 5. Tyre (23:1–18) Holiness to the Lord (23:18)	5. The final gathering (27:1–13) The harvest from Egypt and Assyria (27:12–13)

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Isaiah 13-27 organizes together 15 oracles to the nations. These oracles divide into three cycles of five. In the first cycle of oracles, we will consider the reality of the Lord’s promises. These oracles are spoken to clearly identifiable nations, Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Egypt. Each passage begins with the phrase, “The oracle concerning Babylon...” or “The oracle concerning Philistia...”. The word “oracle” can also be translated as “burden;” the burden concerning Babylon.

In the second set of five oracles, we will focus on the world in shadows. These oracles mostly use descriptive phrases, rather than the names of nations. But even though the references are less concrete than the references in the first five oracles, the nation under question is identifiable. In the final set of oracles, we will focus on two cities in contrast. These five oracles do not use the word “oracle” and they do not speak of nations in an easily identifiable way. Moving through the three cycles, things become less and less clear, or less and less concrete.

Human empires raise themselves up to the level of God and human empires always fall. They cannot last. God will appoint a day for its destruction. That does not happen just at the end of human history, that is the recurring theme of human history. God allows one people to topple another. God's righteousness is revealed as He gives human beings over to themselves. Human armies clash with human armies. Evil on evil. The outcome is horrific. Verse 16,

¹⁶ Their little ones also will be dashed to pieces Their houses will be plundered
before their eyes; and their wives ravished.

This army by be God's consecrated ones, but it is not holy in the moral sense. It is holy only in the sense of being set apart for a particular use. When God calls one wicked people to execute punishment on another wicked people, that army is consecrated in the sense of being given a divine function. If the conquering people does not submit to the authority of God and refuses to live according to His holy character, that people will in turn be punished for the wickedness they do as they carry out the function God called them to serve.

This is one of the challenging truths of the Bible. God remains sovereign and people remain morally responsible. God gives over those who turn from Him.

Fall of the City

The first part of the oracle, 13:1-16, uses Babylon as a symbol of human pride and independence to be judged in the final day. In 17-22, Isaiah provides a specific, historical example of this kind of judgment. Motyer calls this an "interim fulfillment"¹⁶. How can we trust the prophet when he claims God will judge human pride on the last day? You know, something that is thousands of years in the future? The prophet's end times message is given support through predictions that occur much earlier, either in the time of the prophet or in the very near future.

Verses 17-22 predict the judgment of Babylon in a specific concrete instance that foreshadows the judgment of all humanity that will come at the end time. The prediction is pretty dire. Isaiah says that God is going to stir the Medes up against Babylon.

Barbarian peoples lived past the two rivers of Mesopotamia on the northern steppes. The Medes were one of these fierce barbarian people. The Medes would join forces with the Babylonians to topple the Assyrian empire. They help to conquer Nineveh in 612 BC. In fact, the Babylonians had to hurry. They had to rush to get up there so that they can be in on it. That happened 100 years after the death of King Ahaz, who we met in chapter 7. Later, the Medes would join up with the Persians. They may have been cousins. Both were from lands north of Mesopotamia. Daniel and Esther refer several times to the laws of the Medes and the Persians, they include them together. Cyrus the Great, the Persian, will lead the combined forces. Isaiah mentions only the Medes here. Daniel 5:31 does give credit to the military leader Darius the Mede for leading the host that defeated the city of Babylon in 539 BC. That is right after Belshazzar saw the writing on the wall and then Darius the Mede's troops came in. Isaiah's predicted complete destruction. Verses 20-21.

²⁰ It will never be inhabited or lived in from generation to generation;
Nor will the Arab pitch *his* tent there, Nor will shepherds make *their* flocks lie down there.
²¹ But desert creatures will lie down there, And their houses will be full of owls;
Ostriches also will live there, and shaggy goats will frolic there.

That kind of desolation did not come under Cyrus the Persian. So, this passage is sometimes brought up to question how literally we should take Isaiah's predictive prophecy.

The city of Babylon came under Persian rule, then it fell under the Seleucid rule, and it's still standing, that followed the conquest by Alexander, and later eventually declined into desolation. Here is how John Oswalt describes his understanding of this prophecy.

¹⁶ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 146.

“It is certainly true that Babylon, the jewel of the nations, was eventually abandoned and is today. In this way, Isaiah’s prophecy has been fulfilled with a vengeance, but the fulfillment is more that of a principle than in a specific event. For these truths apply to Nineveh and Asshur equally as much as to Babylon. That monument to human glory and achievement, the sprawling imperial city, has no permanence in itself, and the day will come when the very weight of its glory will crash back in upon it and leave it desolate. Only when the glory is a gift of God will there be continuing fruitfulness and joy (35:1, 2; 60:1–22, esp. 1–3, 13, 19).”¹⁷

Security of God’s Remnant

This interim prediction of Babylon’s fall is followed by two short verses assuring Israel of the Lord’s compassion on a future remnant. The two verses may feel out of place. It helps to recognize that this oracle has a chiasmic structure. These two short verses place God’s remnant in the center of the oracle.

We began with A-13:2-26: God’s universal judgment against the pride of humankind. Then we just consider B-13:17-22: the overthrow of Babylon and the end of the kingdom. Now we have come to C, the middle, 14:1-2: the security and future of the Lord’s people. Then we are going to move back out again to B’-14:3-23, to the overthrow of Babylon and the end of the king. And we will finish with A’-14:24-27: God’s universal judgment exemplified through the end of Assyrian power.¹⁸

God’s protection on the remnant of his people provides a central contrasting point to the oracle. God will exert His sovereign judgment over the nations. And through a remnant, He will faithfully fulfill His promises to His chosen people. They will not be swallowed up. They will not disappear in the judgment; in the destruction.

Parallel to the downfall of the city-state of Babylon at the hands of the Medes, Isaiah next describes the downfall of Babylon’s king. King and city bear a close connection in Isaiah, both when we are talking about the worldly city, like Babylon and her king and also when we are talking about God’s city Zion and her King.

Fall of the King

Just as every human city must fall, no matter how glorious, so also every human king must descend into death. Isaiah expertly paints this picture in 14:9-10.

<p>⁹ “Sheol from beneath is excited over you It arouses for you the spirits of the dead, It raises from their thrones</p>	<p>to meet you when you come; all the leaders of the earth; all the kings of the nations</p>
<p>¹⁰ “They will all respond and say to you,</p>	<p>‘Even you have been made weak as we, You have become like us.</p>

That is the inevitability of death, no matter how great the human position or achievement in life, the dead will receive you, “you have become like us.” Isaiah goes on to describe this great human king; he’s a King of kings, He is over nations. And that description is in 14:12-14.

<p>¹² “How you have fallen from heaven, You have been cut down to the earth, ¹³ “But you said in your heart, I will raise my throne And I will sit on the mount of assembly</p>	<p>O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You who have weakened the nations! ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God, In the recesses of the north. ¹⁴ ‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’</p>
---	---

Did you catch the irony? “I will lift myself above the highest place, but in the end Sheol will welcome you down to death, just like everybody else.” Some Church fathers interpreted these verses as the fall of Satan. The Hebrew word “helel,” which means “shining one,” is taken by my Bible as a reference to the planet Venus. So, it is translated, “star of the morning.” As an interesting sidenote,

¹⁷ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986) 309.

¹⁸ Motyer, 106.

the King James Bible translated this Hebrew word using a Latin word that means “light-bringer.” That Latin word was “Lucifer.” And it only ever appeared in English Bibles here in Isaiah 14:12. The name is not used anywhere else. And the Hebrew “helel” was probably never meant as a reference to Satan.

A little bit of trivia: Lucifer is not a Biblical name. Helel may be a literary reference to a Canaanite myth about an attempted coup in Heaven. The Canaanite story refers to lesser gods challenging the high god. So, it’s not too hard to make a comparison to Satan. But Isaiah’s focus throughout the oracle is on human pride. This is not a god challenging Yahweh. This is a creature challenging his creator. This is more like the Tower of Babel.

Any human challenge to deity must be short lived. It can last no longer than the life span of a man.
14:15-20.

15	“Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,	To the recesses of the pit.
16	“Those who see you will gaze at you,	They will ponder over you, <i>saying</i> ,
	‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble,	Who shook kingdoms,
17	Who made the world like a wilderness	And overthrew its cities,
	Who did not allow his prisoners to <i>go home</i> ?’	
18	“All the kings of the nations lie in glory,	Each in his own tomb.
19	“But you have been cast out of your tomb	Like a rejected branch,
	Clothed with the slain who are pierced with	Who go down to the stones of the pit
	a sword	
		Like a trampled corpse.
20	“You will not be united with them in burial,	Because you have ruined your country,
	You have slain your people.	
	May the offspring of evildoers	not be mentioned forever.

End of Human Pride: The Example of Assyria

The oracle concerning the king of Babylon gives us a concrete, specific example of one human being who has declared his arrogant self-sufficiency before God, “I will be the captain of my own soul,” and yet, this is the result. Just as the city will fall, the empire will fall; every man and every woman who lifts themselves up will fall.

Now, the oracle concerning Babylon ends with a declaration of doom on Assyria. Babylon has been used by Isaiah in this oracle as a symbol of Mesopotamian power. Assyria is the concrete representation of Mesopotamian power during Isaiah’s lifetime. It is the nation ruling over the area. Like the fall of Babylon to the Medes, the downfall of Assyria serves as an even nearer interim fulfillment of the promised future overthrow of human pride and self-sufficiency.

Isaiah’s words encourage believing readers to acknowledge God’s sovereign power over whatever superpowers currently stand at the top of human affairs. Trust God, not the superpower. This is 14:24-27.

²⁴ The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, “Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand, ²⁵ to break Assyria in My land, and I will trample him on My mountains. Then his yoke will be removed from them and his burden removed from their shoulder. ²⁶ “This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. ²⁷ “For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate *it*? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?”

Notice Isaiah using this phrase again, “this is the hand that is stretched out against the nations.” It is not only stretched against Israel and Judah as in earlier chapters. God’s hand is stretched out against every nation. We first encountered this phrase paired with the idea of a standard lifted up. That was in 5:25-26. Isaiah has created an inclusio for this oracle by beginning in 13:2 with a reference to God’s standard and ending here in 14:27 with a reference to God’s outstretched hand. This image of God’s sovereignty as King of kings creates bookends around the whole oracle.

The oracle begins and ends with prediction of certain ruin. In 15:1, the first verse, “Ar of Moab is devastated and ruined. Surely in a night Kir of Moab is devastated and ruined.” Then jumping to the end, 16:14, “Within three years as a hired man would count them, the glory of Moab will be degraded along with all his great population.”

That leaves us with the inner frame. In 15:2-4 Moab’s grief is expressed. “They have gone up to the temple and to Dibon, even to the high places to weep. Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba...” In the parallel section, 16:7-8, Moab’s grief is explained. Because God has heard of Moab’s excessive pride, “Therefore Moab shall wail; everyone of Moab shall wail.”

In both cases, the wailing of Moab is followed by the grief of God. That’s new information in this oracle. Isaiah has described for us the punishing of the nations for their wickedness. He has not, until now, talked about how that punishment affects the heart of God. 15:5, “My heart cries out for Moab.” And then later in 16:9 and 11, “Therefore I will weep bitterly for Jazer...My heart intones like a harp for Moab.”

God grieves, but He does not set aside His goodness in his grief. Moab persists in requiring God to give what a holy God cannot give. “Accept me according to my own way. Accept my definition of who you are and my definition of who I am. Accept my assertion of self-sufficiency. Accept my lifestyle. Accept my ruthless commitment to power, money, and fame. Accept my ongoing worship of my own gods on my own high places. Accept me without guilt, or repentance, or will to change.” God grieves, and Moab’s plea for shelter is rejected.

The Oracle Concerning Damascus/Ephraim

The fourth oracle concerning Damascus quickly shifts focus to Ephraim, so we can call it “the Damascus/Ephraim oracle.” The two seen joined together here probably dates this oracle to the time of chapter 7, when the two kings joined together against Judah. It is quite possible that Isaiah wrote different pieces of the Book of the King at different points of his long career. And later in life he expertly wove together different prophecies and different writings to create the first third of the book of Isaiah. That would be one explanation for these various oracles that seem to have some connection to a historical situation, but they don’t give detail about the historical situation, not in this given form, not in this new context because Isaiah is here these oracles thematically.

For example, a delegation may have come from Philistia at some point to woo Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance. And Moab would have suffered a major defeat by Assyria three years after Isaiah spoke his words to Moab. But Isaiah is not concerned in this present book with clarifying those events. He has gathered these writings with updates and transitions, and he has added new material to communicate theologically. As we have noted, the overarching theme is God’s sovereignty over the nations, both in His just punishment of self-sufficient human pride and in His faithfulness to keep His promises for a remnant of His people.

So, even though this oracle concerning Damascus seems to come from the historical period addressed in chapter 7, when the King of Assyria united with the King of Israel to attack Judah, our concern is not with the historical detail of that alliance. Isaiah now uses this oracle to focus on God’s wayward people.

In our list of oracles, the first three and the fifth are nations other than Israel or Judah. That is true of the oracles in the first cycle and it’s going to be true of the oracles that we look at in the second cycle. The fourth position is for God’s chosen people. Here it is Israel, the Northern Kingdom. In our next set of five oracles, it will be Judah in the fourth spot. Motyer points out an interesting fact about the geography of the other four nations mentioned in this cycle. In both cycles, one nation sits to the north of Israel, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west. In this set of five, Babylon sits to the north; Philistia is on the coast, it’s to the west; Moab is across the Jordan, to the east; and Egypt is to the south. We will see the same pattern with different nations in the next set of five oracles. So, then we can ask, “What does this do for us? Why this literary arrangement?” It highlights the fact that Israel is surrounded by other peoples. We are encouraged to ask, “What is the

relationship between the chosen people of God and the surrounding nations; you know, both super-powers like Babylon and Egypt, as well as regional neighbors like Philistia and Moab?" Isaiah's development of the relationship between the people of God and the world is complex. Here are three realities.

1. The peoples of the world are opposed to the Kingdom of God and constitute a threat to God's people. In that sense, the fact that these nations surround Israel is menacing.
2. Nevertheless, the nations of the world exist for the people of God. Every nation belongs to the universal Kingdom. Every nation depends on the sovereignty of God for their existence. God places kings and God removes kings. There is some sense in which the governments and kingdoms of the earth exist to create basic order that exists to benefit the people of God. And they all owe allegiance to the people of God. God's people represent His Kingdom on Earth.
3. In another way, the people of God exist for the nations. God promised Abraham that he would be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:3). On Mount Sinai, God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). Priests serve as mediators to help others worship and serve God. And Israel was supposed to live according to the law of God as a witness to the nations (Deuteronomy 4:6).

So, Israel exists as a means by which others can come to know God. In this multifaceted relationship with the peoples of the world, the people of God may feel threatened, they may feel overwhelmed, they may feel awed by all the success of everybody else. They are not to solve that threat by turning to the world for help, by depending on the world, or depending on their own worldly strength and strategies. The people of God center their hope in the faithfulness of God so that, instead of fearing the world, they might be a witness to the world. We can see Israel's place, surrounded by these nations as an image of threat, but we can also see it as an image of special calling. They are central to God's plan for the nations.

This oracle to Damascus/Ephraim has two messages. The first is to God's people. The second is to the world.

Destruction is prophesied for God's people Israel because they have turned from God, worshipping idols and trusted in worldly alliances. Verses 7, 8, and 10.

⁷ In that day man will have regard for his Maker And his eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel. ⁸
He will not have regard for the altars, the work of his hands, Nor will he look to that which his fingers have made, Even the Asherim and incense stands.

¹⁰ For you have forgotten the God of your salvation And have not remembered the rock of your refuge.
Therefore you plant delightful plants And set them with vine slips of a strange *god*.

Though God does punish His people, the peoples of the earth will not be given complete dominion over God's chosen ones. The second half of the oracle concerns the peoples of the world. 17:13, 18:3, and 5,

^{13a} The nations rumble on like the rumbling But He will rebuke them and they will flee
of many waters, far away,
³ All you inhabitants of the world and dwellers on earth,
As soon as a standard is raised on the mountains, And as soon as the trumpet is blown,
you will see *it*, you will hear *it*.
^{5b} Then He will cut off the sprigs with pruning knives And remove *and* cut away the spreading branches.

Isaiah's image in that last verse, verse 5 is one of pruning the nations. That's an interesting change. The judgment on the nations has to this point been communicated by Isaiah in terms of complete destruction. Pruning sounds like a removal of what is bad, so that the good might flourish. You're not cutting down or burning up the vine; you're pruning it. We get a hint in this last verse that God wants the remnant to include peoples other than just Jews. He has a plan for the Gentiles - 18:7,

⁷ At that time a gift of homage will be brought to the LORD of hosts from a people tall and smooth, Even from a people feared far and wide, A powerful and oppressive nation, Whose land the rivers divide— To the place of the name of the LORD of hosts, *even* Mount Zion.

Gentile peoples, or at least a remnant of Gentile peoples, will enter Zion in the day of the Lord.

The Oracle Concerning Egypt

That final thought of Gentiles entering Zion was suggested as early as chapter 2. I mentioned that already. It is an idea that will be made with particular force in our final oracle concerning Egypt.

This oracle has three parts. It begins with a prediction of Egypt's downfall, and it ends with an interim fulfillment of that prediction. The central section offers a message of hope to the Egyptians. We'll start with the beginning and the end, and then come back to the center.

The collapse of Egypt, depicted in 19:1-15, uses language we saw earlier in the judgment of Judah and Israel. They will turn to mediums and spiritists. That is also in 8:19. They will turn on each other brother against brother. That was also in 9:21. Their leadership will fail, "head and tail, palm branch and bulrush". That's the language of 9:14 and here 9:15. Isaiah is saying, "Why would you trust in Egypt for security when they will experience the exact same kind of punishment by the hand of God that Judah and Israel experience?"

Isaiah uses the Canaanite language of Baal appearing on the clouds to describe Yahweh arriving with power to topple the false God's of Egypt.

¹ Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud	and is about to come to Egypt;
The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence,	And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

That same image of coming on the clouds will be used later in Daniel 7 of the Son of Man, and again by Jesus to describe His second coming in Matthew 24:30. Here in Isaiah, the coming judgment of the Lord cannot be stopped by seeking help from false gods. The idolatry of Egypt will result for her, just as it does for lesser nations, in a breakdown of society. The religion, social structure, economics, purported wisdom of Egypt will all fail. As the superpower Babylon, keeper of ancient Sumerian culture, must eventually fall, so also, Egypt with her ancient culture must inevitably end.

The oracle does not describe the historical occasion of Egypt's fall. For a possible fulfillment, we would have to look at least 30 or 40 years further to the Assyrian victories by Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. Though what is mind here might point to the total humiliation of Egypt, and that is not going to come for almost 200 years, when Egypt is subjugated under Persia as a mere province. We are not sure what the historical fulfillment of this was meant to be, but we understand the theme. Superpowers end. The pride of man comes crashing down.

That's the beginning of this oracle. The end describes the defeat of Ashdod, one of the major Philistine cities, not of Egypt. Egypt continually sought to bring the nations of the Levant into alliance against the northern menace of Assyria – or Babylon, you know, whoever it is up north. Around this time, depending on assurances from Egypt, Ashdod rebelled against the Assyrian King Sargon II and sent out calls to Judah, and Edom, and Moab to join them. Sargon marched against Ashdod in 711 BC, removed its king and reduced it to the status of an Assyrian province. Egypt didn't come help. They did not fulfill their promises of support to the Philistines.

The defeat of Ashdod serves as an interim fulfillment of prophecy against Egypt. Just as we see Egypt's lesser allies fall, so too you can be sure that Egypt's fall will come true. Egypt did fall as a superpower and has not recovered.

The lesson here is not only to take God at His word when He says that Egypt is going to fall. The fall of Ashdod also reminds the people of God not to look to the great nations of Earth for security. That's the point of the last verse, "Behold, such is our hope, where we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria; and we, how shall we, escape?" See, Egypt didn't come.

Israel will not find security in Egypt from Assyria or in Assyria from Egypt. Assyria and Egypt must both find security in the God of Israel. That's the surprising message of the central section. Hope is not surprising. All of these oracles have offered a glimmer of hope in a couple of verses. The surprise here is that the hope is extended to the people of Egypt and the people of Assyria, the oppressors of Israel. What a shock Isaiah's words must have been to his Jewish audience! Listen to Isaiah 19:20–25, it all sounds like it should be spoken to Israel,

²⁰ It will become a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the LORD because of oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Champion, and He will deliver them. ²¹ Thus the LORD will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day. They will even worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to the LORD and perform it. ²² The LORD will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to them and will heal them. ²³ In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. ²⁴ In that day Israel will be the third *party* with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, ²⁵ whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."

"Blessed is Egypt my people"? How does God call Egypt His people? "And Assyria the work of my hands"? God is molding Assyria? Really, Egypt and Assyria are to be given equal status together with "Israel my inheritance"? Each is given a third part? I mean, Israel does not even receive the double blessing of the eldest son. Each gets a third. They share the inheritance equally. It is one thing to prophecy the salvation of Gentiles in general. You know, send missionaries to save those pagans out there, like the Gentiles of chapter 2 that are going to stream into Zion. And there, the Jewish remnant may be seen as central. The Gentiles come for help. They submit to the preeminence of Israel. But here Isaiah gives Gentiles an equal part. And when Isaiah starts naming the particular Gentiles, the whole idea becomes repulsive. "Yes, let's include Gentiles. But not the Assyrians. Not the Egyptians." Remember Jonah's anger at God's compassion on Nineveh. These people deserve justice, not mercy. This is too close to home, God. These are our oppressors.

Black and White. Croat and Serb, Ukrainian and Russian, Han Chinese and Uyghur, Iranian and Iraqi, all together with their Jewish brothers and sisters. God is not the God of any regional people. God is the God of all nations. He is King of Kings, who is sovereign in His justice. Every people will be held accountable equally. And He extends mercy with impartiality. Every person from every people group is invited to seek refuge in Him.

Lesson 11 Isaiah 21-23 The Second Cycle of Oracles

Introduction

Isaiah has just unleashed poetic judgment on Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Israel, and Egypt. He also managed to draw in Assyria, Syria, and Cush. And that was just the first cycle of five oracles. Isaiah feels complete freedom to prophesy hope or doom on any people in the name of Yahweh. They can be regional neighbors, they can be far off peoples, or they can be the major super-powers of the era. Isaiah does not recognize the authority of any peoples' own gods. He recognizes Yahweh as the right ruler over all people. Everyone owes the God of Israel homage. That's not unique to Isaiah. All the major prophetic works - Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel - dedicate space to judgment on other nations. So do some of the shorter prophecies. Jonah is all about proclaiming judgment on Nineveh. Nahum does the same. Amos targets Israel, but not until he first warms up on Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab.

We recognized the placement of Ephraim in our first cycle at the center of the nations with one oracle going to the north, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west. Israel holds a central place. What does that mean, to put Israel at the center? How are we supposed to understand the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles, that is, all the other nations of the world? Before we get into the five oracles of this second cycle, let's step back for a moment and think about the big picture Biblical story. What is God's relationship with the nations of the earth and how does God's special people Israel fit into that relationship?

Genesis 1-11 serves as a preface to the Torah – the first five books of the Bible: the Law - giving us a synopsis of history before the calling of Abraham. Through most of that synopsis humanity is larger addressed as a whole. Emphasis on separate nations occurs as the descendants of Noah spread out and is intensified at the Tower of Babel. Human civilization came together in arrogant self-sufficiency to raise themselves up and bring God down. They insisted on making a name for themselves. God did not relinquish His claim on the nations at the tower of Babel. God may have punished them. He may have divided them, but He did not relinquish His claim on the nations at the tower of Babel. What He did was include a special focus on a people that was not yet a people.

God divided the nations and then chose a new nation with whom to covenant. Abraham was not to make a name for himself like the people at Babel. God told Abraham, "I will make your name great. I will make you a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3)." God did not choose the one special nation as a rejection of all other peoples. He chose one nation as a witness through which the rest might come back into relationship with Him. Abraham's seed is to bless the nations.

The Old Testament emphasizes how God used the practice of ancient Near Eastern covenant to communicate the nature of His relationship with people. We can divide the Biblical covenants into common grace covenants, that define relationship with all of humanity; and special grace covenants, that define relationship with a particular group. God's special grace covenants do not set aside the common grace covenants.

There are four major special grace covenants in Scripture. It is easiest to identify those covenants with the four special prophets God used as covenant mediators: Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. God established the Covenant of promise through Abraham with his family, the Covenant of law through Moses with the nation Israel, the Covenant of kingship through David with his heirs, and the Covenant of grace through Jesus with the Church. These Covenants are all related to one another and are fulfilled in Jesus. We who have relationship with God today rightly understand our relationship with God through the New Covenant, which I've called "the covenant of grace." That's following Paul in Romans. The believing Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who lived before Jesus rightly defined their relationship with God through the Old Covenant, which Paul referred to as "The covenant of Law."

Those are the special grace covenants: the Covenant of promise, Law, kingship, and of grace. There are two common grace covenants in Scripture. Common grace covenants are established with all of

humankind. The first common grace covenant was established in Genesis 1 and 2 through Adam and Eve, the first king and queen who were made in the image of God and commissioned to rule over the creation. That covenant was with all of their descendants. A second common grace covenant renewed that earlier through Noah with his descendants. Before the Flood in Genesis 6:18 God promised Noah, "I will establish my covenant with you." That's why Noah was required to take 7 pairs of certain clean animals, so that there would be animals to sacrifice and ratify the covenant. After the Flood, God communicates with Noah using the covenant language he had used with Adam and Eve. So, in Genesis 9:1, "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'" Jumping down to verse 9, God affirms what has just happened, "I myself do establish my covenant with you, and with your descendants after you."

The common grace covenant was not set aside after the Tower of Babel. The special grace covenant was added as a means by which to reach all peoples through a special group of people. There is one God, creator of all peoples, whose heart longs for everyone to come into relationship with Him. God always has been and always will be God of the nations. The major role of all believers who have come under special grace covenant, whether the Old Covenant back then or the New Covenant now, is to act as a kingdom of priests, bringing glory to God by living for Him as a holy people, and by extending His invitation to all others to enter into covenant relationship.

Isaiah helps us to see that the relationship between the peoples of the world and the people of God is one that includes both threat and hope. The threat of being surrounded by the nations of the world is two-fold. The nations might reject, hate, or oppress the people of God as they try to live differently for God. Or the people of God might adopt the practices of the nations to try and fit in or to succeed like they see others succeeding. Our first set of oracles mostly dealt with the nations as threat. And the prophecies emphasized God's judgment on the nations for their rejection of Him and their treatment of His people.

But in every oracle Isaiah also included a glimmer of hope. Isaiah had set a precedent for that back in chapter 2 with the image of a Zion that will include a believing remnant of Jews together with peoples of the earth who had said, "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord that he may teach us concerning his ways." Our first cycle developed this picture of future hope, both for a remnant of Jews and also for included Gentiles. In fact, we ended with the incredible picture of Egyptians, Assyrians, and Jews worshiping God together and sharing equally in His inheritance.

That hope, shining through the gloom in the first cycle will only barely peak out in the second cycle. Hope becomes obscured by the shadow of human evil. Moving into the second set of oracles, Isaiah's vision seems less concrete and more abstract. That may be intended to correspond to his gazing into the future. It is similar to how the clear lines of a building or a mountain become blurred in our sight the farther away we are. From a distance we don't see things clearly. That may be what is happening here, in these oracles. For example, Isaiah mostly uses symbolic names to identify the recipients. The lines are drawn less clearly. Historical context for the oracles is mostly lost. And hope is covered by shadow. We cannot see it.

This section is shorter than our last, spanning only three chapters. So, I'll read the text. Still, it is three chapters, so I'll keep moving, stopping to emphasize the main principle of each oracle and to address several interesting references.

I will start with a principle from our last set of oracles. Isaiah has been presenting God as the true king, sovereign over all peoples. And that principle was stated clearly at the end of our very first oracle, back in Isaiah 14:26-27.

²⁶ "This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. ²⁷ "For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate *it*? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?"

That plan includes judgment and hope. And as we peer ahead, the problems are going to seem to be without solution. Hope is lost in the gloom.

The Desert By the Sea (Babylon): The Fall of the Gods (21:1-10)

We begin with the oracle to Babylon in Isaiah 21:1-10. I will take it in parts, starting with verses 1-2.

¹ The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea.

As windstorms in the Negev sweep on,

It comes from the wilderness, from a terrifying land.

² A harsh vision has been shown to me;

The treacherous one *still* deals treacherously,
and the destroyer *still* destroys.

Go up, Elam, lay siege, Media;

I have made an end of all the groaning she has caused.

The windstorms in the Negev put us in Judah. The natural phenomena of windstorms symbolizes windstorms of human politics and conflict. The storms come from a terrifying land of treachery and destruction. Babylon is not clearly identified by the phrase “desert” or “wilderness by the sea.” The city of Babylon sat on the Euphrates, closer to the Persian Gulf. That area is between the two rivers, and it should be lush and fertile, so calling it a “desert” or “wilderness by the sea” looks ahead to the devastation that is coming. Elam and Media are neighbors of Babylon, and here they are called by God to lay siege. Though Babylon is an enemy of Judah, Isaiah is going to recoil in horror of the war to come. He waits for riders to come from Babylon to announce the results. This in verses 3-10.

³ For this reason my loins are full of anguish;

Pains have seized me like the pains of a woman
in labor.

I am so bewildered I cannot hear,

so terrified I cannot see.

⁴ My mind reels,

horror overwhelms me;

The twilight I longed for

has been turned for me into trembling.

⁵ They set the table, they spread out the cloth,

they eat, they drink; “Rise up, captains,
oil the shields,”

⁶ For thus the Lord says to me,

“Go, station the lookout,

let him report what he sees.

⁷ “When he sees riders,

horsemen in pairs,

A train of donkeys,

a train of camels,

Let him pay close attention,

very close attention.”

⁸ Then the lookout called,

“O Lord, on the watchtower,

I stand continually by day

And I am stationed every night at my guard post.

⁹ “Now behold, here comes

a troop of riders, horsemen in pairs.”

And one said,

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon;

And all the images of her gods are shattered on the ground.”

¹⁰ O my threshed *people*, and my afflicted of the threshing floor!

What I have heard from the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, I make known to you.

God’s people of Judah are the ones who have been threshed. It’s hard to understand in this what is Isaiah looking for. It’s like he is expecting an army to come from Babylon. Is he anguished over what he sees is happening to Babylon, or is he anguished over what might happen to Judah? I’m not sure. Thinking about ancient empire: empires like Assyria, and Babylon, and Persia, they bullied smaller nations like Judah, limiting their freedoms, exacting tribute. But empires also tended to bring in a kind of enforced peace. Kind of like the Pax Romana, you know, that later phrase for Rome, “the peace of Rome”, yeah, it’s peace, but how do the Germanic tribes feel about that peace? It was enforced on them when they were crushed. There is this reality of peace, but it comes at a cost to the smaller peoples. But it does mean this: it means that the fall of an empire inevitably means warfare among regional powers as they struggle to re-assert dominance over neighbors, and warfare as major powers seek to establish who is the new “big guy”; can they step into the void and create their own empire?

The main idea of this oracle comes out in verse 9, “And one said, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the images of her gods are shattered on the ground.’” The security provided by empires is both costly

and temporary. Babylon's gods are fallen. They promised power, security, affluence, but those promises are based on a failed world view. Their spiritual assumptions are vain and corrupt. The security provided by Babylon lures the faithful to adopt their values and their practices. There's always a cost. And Babylon must fall. Every empire falls. It's limited. It's temporary. The promises of Babylon will fail with her gods, shattered on the ground.

Silence (Edom): The Prolongation of Time (21:11-12)

The next oracle concerns Dumah, that is the Hebrew word used here. It literally means "silence". It was also the name of one of Ishmael's sons (Genesis 25:14). The later reference to Seir definitely connects the oracle to the land of Edom. It is just two verses, 21:11-12.

¹¹ The oracle concerning [silence].

One keeps calling to me from Seir,	"Watchman, how far gone is the night?
Watchman, how far gone is the night?"	

¹² The watchman says, "Morning comes	but also night.
If you would inquire, inquire;	Come back again."

The word for "lookout" in the previous oracle – looking out for the army to come - is similar to "watchman" here. The lookout brought news of Babylon's fall. Isaiah's question here, "How far gone is the night?" pictures a night watchman, whose duty is to call out the watches of the night, to let us know how far we are away from dawn. The image fits any trial or troubling time that we might find ourselves in. We are asking ourselves, "How long the night, Lord? How long the night?"

Isaiah has just heard the first report of the empire's fall. How long the night? Warfare is coming. Instability. When will security be re-established? Or maybe we are looking even further ahead, "Oh, Lord, when will this whole age end? When will human empire end and the reign of Zion begin?"

The watchman' answer, "Morning comes, but also night. If you would inquire, inquire; come back again." That's no answer. And that's not the answer we want from God. The oracle is aptly named, "Silence". Mornings must come, nights must fall, mornings will come again. You are welcome to inquire and inquire again. The times will not be yet made known. Expect night to break, light to come, and night to fall again.

Desert Evening (Arabian Tribes): Needs But No Solutions (21:13-17)

Like with the word "dumah" in the preceding oracle, the Hebrew for the next oracle is not clear. My Bible chooses the more concrete translation, "Arabia." Motyer likes the translation "desert evenings" and says the reference is not to Arabia as a nation but to the tribes of Arabia. Isaiah 21:13-17.

¹³ The oracle [concerning the desert evening].

In the thickets of Arabia	you must spend the night, O caravans of Dedanites.
¹⁴ For the thirsty,	bring water
O inhabitants of the land of Tema,	Meet the fugitive with bread.
¹⁵ For they have fled from the swords,	From the drawn sword,
and from the bent bow	And from the press of battle.

¹⁶ For thus the Lord said to me, "In a year, as a hired man would count it, all the splendor of Kedar will terminate; ¹⁷and the remainder of the number of bowmen, the mighty men of the sons of Kedar, will be few; for the LORD God of Israel has spoken."

There are a lot of references here we have probably never heard of. The Dedanites were an Arabian tribe. Tema was an oasis city and a caravan center far to the southeast of Judah, out in the Arabian Peninsula. Kedar was also an Arabian tribe, and it was the name of the northern extension of Arabian desert, part closest to Babylon. Archeological records affirm that Arabian tribes were involved in the politics of the times. The Assyrian king Sargon II campaigned against Arabian tribes in 715. And in 703 tribes joined the Babylonians against the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

The fall of Babylon depicted in the first oracle spreads instability throughout the former empire. I think we should interpret the oracle as picturing the Dedanites fleeing war. And since Kedar is in the north, closer to Babylon, we can imagine warfare starting there, pushing refugees south towards Tema. And the refugees must spend the night in the thickets of Arabia. They are out in the wilderness. They are in an insecure place. And they need to be met with bread and water.

Where is the security in human empire? It's bleeding. It comes, it goes. It will be broken. Security will be lost. Human need increases.

The Valley of Vision (Jerusalem): The Unforgiveable Sin (22:1-25)

Moving on to the fourth oracle, we come again to the people of God. As in the first cycle, they are symbolically surrounded by peoples of the earth. First was Babylon to the north, then Edom to the south, Arabia to the east, and we are going to end with Tyre to the west. How will the people of God respond to the reality of living in the midst of other peoples? Will they embrace their role as a city on a hill, shining a light for others to see?

Well, they did not in the first cycle. The people of God Israel rejected the way of faith for an alliance with the world. Ephraim sought security in treaty with Damascus, even to the point of turning on Judah, which is an interesting image for us as the people of God today. How does the Church respond to the fact that it exists in secular cultures surrounded by people who do not share the Church's worldview or values? Will we be a light on a hill? Sometimes not. Sometimes the Church acts like Ephraim, making a treaty with the world, seeking security by exchanging the way of faith to become more acceptable to secular peoples, and even turning on Christians who desire to maintain the values and beliefs of Biblical truth.

Is that how the people of God, Judah, respond to being surrounded by the nations of the earth in this second cycle? Is Judah making a treaty here with a foreign power? Well, no, they are not. That is not going to be a problem here. The problem here is self-sufficiency. Judah is just going to press ahead, ignoring the discipline of God and, in their own optimistic strategies they are going to fix things themselves. Which is another lesson for Church. We might adopt the strategies and the "we can do it" kind of attitude of the world, and forget our first love for Christ, and forget that everything depends on our faith in God.

The oracle is for the valley of vision. Later in the passage it will be made clear that this is Judah. Isaiah is going to begin with a lament that the people of Judah don't die in battle but are carried off as slaves. This is verses 1-4.

¹ The oracle concerning the valley of vision.

What is the matter with you now, that you have all gone up to the housetops?

² You who were full of noise, you boisterous town, you exultant city;

Your slain were not slain with the sword, Nor did they die in battle.

³ All your rulers have fled together, *And* have been captured without the bow;

All of you who were found were taken captive Though they had fled far away.

together,

⁴ Therefore I say, "Turn your eyes away from me,

Let me weep bitterly,

Do not try to comfort me concerning the destruction of the daughter of my people."

Then in 5-8a Isaiah envisions invaders taking up position and overwhelming Jerusalem.

⁵ For it is a day of panic, subjugation and confusion For the Lord GOD of hosts

In the valley of vision, a breaking down of walls And a crying to the mountain.

⁶ Elam took up the quiver With the chariots, infantry *and* horsemen;

And Kir uncovered the shield.

⁷ Then your choicest valleys were full of chariots,

And the horsemen took up fixed positions at the gate.

⁸ And He removed the defense of Judah.

Isaiah paints a picture of foreign peoples from Elam and Kir invading Judah. Elam had gone up to attack Babylon. They got news that Babylon has fallen. There is no rejoicing, because Isaiah knows what is coming next. You know, one empire falls, another people takes up its place. And this is no raiding party. This is a fully arrayed army with chariots, infantry, and horsemen. Maybe we get here an explanation for the oracles reference to “valley of the vision.” In the valley of vision walls are broken down and a cry goes up to the mountain. It’s like someone is down in the valley and they are crying out, and there are mountains all around. And this is the place Isaiah is having the vision. It’s as though he is walking in the valley of the shadow of death. And he cries out, “Let me weep bitterly, do not try to comfort me.” And I think that’s what’s meant by “valley of the vision.” This is the dreadful place where Isaiah sees the destruction of his own people.

He describes a human army, but the beginning and ending of this sub-section, verses 5a and 8a attribute the devastation to “the Lord GOD of hosts...he removed the defense of Judah.” That name, “Lord GOD of hosts” we encountered four times in chapter 10. It was the name, “Adonai Yahweh Sabaoth.” And it emphasizes the Lord’s sovereignty as He uses one nation to punish another. All nations are His host and He directs them where He wills. When He opens, they can enter, and when He shuts they must be turned away. In chapter 10 the punishment fell on Assyria. It was for the vindication of the people of God. Here the Lord God of hosts removes His protecting hand from Judah, allowing another punishing host to enter in.

The turn in the passage comes in the next section. How will the people of God respond to the Lord’s punishment?

In that day you depended on the weapons of the house of the forest,
⁹ And the breaches on the wall You saw were many;
of the city of David

And you collected the waters of the lower pool.

¹⁰ Then you counted the houses of Jerusalem And tore down houses to fortify the wall.

¹¹ And you made a reservoir between the two walls For the waters of the old pool.
But you did not depend on Him who made it, Nor did you take into consideration Him
who planned it long ago.

They depended on their own abilities. They have got some great crisis managers going on here. There are breaches in the walls, and they are tearing down houses, “Let’s fill up those breaches! Fill it up!” They are going to have a problem with their water, so they are redirecting the flow of water to form a new reservoir with new defenses. “But you did not depend on Him who made it.” They are refashioning Jerusalem to try to handle this crisis that is pouring through so many places in the wall, but in the crisis you did not “take into consideration Him who planned it long ago.” There is no thought of God’s role in this. They don’t consider that the invading army was directed by the outstretched arm of God, even though they have prophecy telling them that that’s so. And they don’t turn to God in prayer, and they don’t repent. Discipline does no good for those who refuse to consider their own ways; to turn from their path of self-destruction and to cry out to God. Verses 12-14.

¹² Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts called in that day
to weeping, to wailing, To shaving the head and to wearing sackcloth.
¹³ Instead, there is gaiety and gladness, Killing of cattle and slaughtering of sheep,
Eating of meat and drinking of wine: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die.”
¹⁴ But the LORD of hosts revealed Himself to me, “Surely this iniquity shall not be forgiven you
Until you die,” says the Lord GOD of hosts.

It is this ironic picture of, in the midst of the weeping, and the wailing, and the destruction coming on Jerusalem there is this gaiety and gladness that is human rejection of the facts that surround them.

“Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we may die,” but there is no consideration of God. And Isaiah says, “Surely, this iniquity shall not be forgiven you.” This is an unforgivable sin. And there is a connection here with the unforgivable sin in Matthew 12:31. There Jesus says that speaking against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable. In that context, the leaders of Israel have seen the works Jesus is doing and have claimed Jesus employs demonic spirits. So, the works of Jesus: healing the lame, giving sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf were prophesied by Isaiah and others so that the leaders of Israel could identify the Messiah. But in seeing those signs – signs of the Holy Spirit – they say, “That is of Satan!” So, it creates this unforgivable situation, because Jesus is the source of forgiveness, and signs were given to prove that Jesus is that source, and they call the signs “of Satan.” And in rejecting the signs they reject Jesus: they reject God’s way of forgiveness. They cannot be forgiven.

In this day, God has sent prophets to tell the people, “Invasion is going to come to punish you for sin!” And the point of letting them know this is so that they might repent. If that prophecy comes true and the people of Judah refuse to accept it as discipline from God, instead they ignore God, and they continue in their way, they will not be convicted of sin, they will not repent, they will not experience forgiveness.

In the first cycle, Israel turned from the walk of faith by making alliance with Damascus. Here, Judah turns from the walk of faith by adopting the human attitude of self-reliance. The actions of Judah’s leaders in crisis to patch the walls and reroute the water supply is not a problem in and of itself. Nehemiah will be commended for his initiative in rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls. He took that initiative as an outworking of faith, not as a substitute for faith. What we see in these people is they have blinders on, and they refuse to acknowledge spiritual reality. “We can fix this! We can fix this!” Then there is no forgiveness, if you refuse with your eyes to see and with your ears to hear; there is no hope.

The oracle is not done yet. Isaiah does something interesting here that he doesn’t do anywhere else in this whole section of three cycles. He shifts from consideration of nations to consideration of two individuals. He is going to name two people. And in doing so, he reminds us that when the Bible characterizes a people as either rebellious or faithful, that characterization always assumes individual attitudes and actions. Individuals choose to trust God. Individuals choose to rebel against God. Talking about nations is a way of talking collectively about a whole group of individuals. Isaiah has been talking about Judah as group. Now he gives us an example of an individual.

Isaiah’s example of Shebna, steward of the king’s household, is also going to serve a second purpose. He is both an individual example of self-reliance and he is going to be an interim fulfillment of prophecy. The fall of Jerusalem is not going to happen in Isaiah’s day. It is going to be another 100 years. The fall of Shebna does happen in Isaiah’s day. Shebna and Eliakim are contemporaries of Isaiah. Shebna represents the self-sufficiency attributed to the nation as a whole. Eliakim represents the walk of faith the nation is called to follow. Isaiah’s prediction of the fates of these two individuals, the demotion of Shebna and the elevation of Eliakim, seems to have already come true by the time we get to the story of Hezekiah in Isaiah 36. 36:3 mentions Eliakim as head of the king’s household, not Shebna. Shebna is referred to as “a scribe.” So, God has given Isaiah a vision that is going to come true in his own time, to serve as a sign that this later vision of Jerusalem’s fall is also going to come true, even though we have to wait 100 years for it.

This is what Isaiah has to say about Shebna, verses 15-19.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>15 Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts,
“Come, go to this steward,</p> <p>16 ‘What right do you have here, and whom do you
have here,
You who hew a tomb on the height,</p> <p>17 ‘Behold, the LORD is about to hurl you headlong,
O man.</p> | <p>To Shebna, who is in charge of the <i>royal</i> household,
That you have hewn a tomb for yourself here,
You who carve a resting place for yourself
in the rock?
And He is about to grasp you firmly</p> |
|--|--|

- ¹⁸ *And roll you tightly like a ball,
There you will die*
*To be cast into a vast country;
And there your splendid chariots will be,
You shame of your master’s house.’*
- ¹⁹ *“I will depose you from your office,
And I will pull you down from your station.*

Isaiah gives us this example of Shebna’s self-centeredness in his description of his tomb that Shebna has carved for himself. The kind of man who thinks his future legacy is best maintained by a rich, ornate tomb for everybody to see after he dies, that is not the kind of man who serves to love God and God’s people. He thinks of his own future in very materialistic terms without giving due attention to the future needs of Judah. Isaiah says that God will cast him away. He is going to roll him like a ball and throw him away like a dirty garment. He is a shame to the house of David. He will be deposed.

The section about Eliakim is bracketed by the phrase “in that day.” That phrase can look ahead to the day of judgment or look ahead 100 years to the day of Jerusalem’s fall. But here, the phrase emphasizes God’s sovereign action in the life of an individual. “In that day” it’s going to be God doing something in a particular day in Eliakim’s life. God can humble a mighty man and He can raise up another whenever He desires. Verses 20-25.

- ²⁰ “Then it will come about in that day, That I will summon My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah,
²¹ And I will clothe him with your tunic and tie your sash securely about him. I will entrust him with your authority, and he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²² “Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, When he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open. ²³ “I will drive him *like* a peg in a firm place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house. ²⁴ “So they will hang on him all the glory of his father’s house, offspring and issue, all the least of vessels, from bowls to all the jars. ²⁵ “In that day,” declares the LORD of hosts, “the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken.”

This passage gives us another connection to Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew 16:19 Jesus says to Peter something very similar to what Isaiah has just said about Eliakim,

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

The idea of receiving keys and authority is best understood by the image of a household steward. That’s the meaning of the words here in 22:22 when Isaiah says of Eliakim,

Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open.

Peter and the Apostles (later included in Matthew 18:18) were commissioned to act as stewards in this same sense. They do not open or shut Heaven on their own authority. They cannot say someone is forgiven or not forgiven: it’s not in them. They act on the authority of Jesus. They proclaim the gospel message of their King. If a person accepts that Gospel message, the Apostles, acting on the authority of Jesus, can declare that person forgiven. Heaven has been opened to them. If a person rejects the Gospel message of Jesus, the Apostles have the authority to declare that Heaven is shut, because you have rejected Jesus, you have rejected the words of the King.

So that is kind of cool. This reference to Eliakim, steward of David’s house, helps us to understand the context of Jesus’ words to His apostles. In the current context, Eliakim is Isaiah’s example of a man who walks by faith. We also see in Eliakim the danger that exists for all who lead in God’s service. Eliakim is faithful. He is going to be raised to a position of glory. The opposite of Shebna, he is like a peg in the house of David on which pots and garments then can hang. He is solid and he is useful for his Master. He is not the Messiah. He is not king David. The glory is not his own. When he serves God well, he is still but a peg in the household. That should be a humbling image for Eliakim. There is glory, but glory in the right place. It is also necessary for the people to understand the image, because it is said of Eliakim, “He will be like a father to the people.” He is going to be a faithful

leader. He is going to bless many. But no matter how faithful, or fruitful, or gifted a man or woman of God might be, they must never become the ones we depend on. The walk of faith is not a walk of self-sufficiency, and it is not dependence on the sufficiency of other human beings, no matter how spiritually good they might be as a teacher, or a mentor, or a pastor, or a model. So, we get what I think is a warning in the last verse.

“In that day,” declares the LORD of hosts, “the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken.”

Now, that could be coming back to a reference about Shebna. He is the peg broken off. But we have really emphasized Eliakim as the peg. So, I think what is being said is that Eliakim himself will one day give way. Every human peg is a peg. Every peg eventually breaks off. We all diminish, even those who preserve faithfully through all their days. The curse of death is on us all. We are mortal. Do not place your faith in a strong spiritual leader. That leader cannot believe in God for you. Your walk is your walk. Isaiah is calling every individual in Judah to repent and to personally trust in God.

Tyre: Pride and Holiness (23:1-18)

We come now to the last oracle in this cycle, the oracle to Tyre. If Babylon represents the pride of a military and cultural empire, Tyre represents the pride of an economic empire. Tyre is a port city to the northeast of Israel on the Mediterranean coast. Along with other Phoenician city-states like Sidon and Byblos, Tyre built up wealth and influence through maritime trade. That influence included the spread of their particular brand of Baal worship, which notably affected the northern people of Israel through Jezebel, princess of Tyre, wife of king Ahab, and nemesis of the prophet Elijah. There is a cost to their influence.

Tyre colonized settlements around the Mediterranean as a growing trade network. The most famous colony of Tyre was Carthage on the north African coast. The influence of Phoenician culture can be detected in the most famous son of Carthage, whose name I bet you’ve heard – Hannibal. Hannibal’s name comes from two Semitic words, “hanna” and “bal,” - Hannibal. It literally means, “the grace of baal.” Where they spread their influence, Tyre is spreading its worldview.

Major nations like Egypt depended on Tyre to provide a market for grain and other products. That trade network extended as far as Tarshish, where Jonah wanted to flee to. That is in modern day Spain.

The main oracle begins and ends with a lament, “Wail, for Tyre is destroyed, without house or harbor...”, after which we have a short post-script. Between the statements of lament, we have two sub-sections. The first, in 2-7, describes the downfall of Tyre and Sidon.

¹ The oracle concerning Tyre.

Wail, O ships of Tarshish,
From the land of Cyprus

For Tyre is destroyed, without house *or* harbor;
It is reported to them.

² Be silent, you inhabitants of the coastland,
Your messengers crossed the sea
The grain of the Nile, the harvest of the River
was her revenue;

You merchants of Sidon;
³ And *were* on many waters.
And she was the market of nations.

⁴ Be ashamed, O Sidon;
the stronghold of the sea, saying,
“I have neither travailed nor given birth,

For the sea speaks,
I have neither brought up young men
nor reared virgins.”

⁵ When the report *reaches* Egypt,

They will be in anguish at the report of Tyre.

⁶ Pass over to Tarshish;

Wail, O inhabitants of the coastland.

⁷ Is this your jubilant *city*,
Whose feet used to carry her

Whose origin is from antiquity,
to colonize distant places?

exile, Tyre and Sidon will send supplies to Jerusalem under the order of Cyrus the Great to help rebuild the Temple. Benefit like this from the human society is one of the ways God's people relate to the peoples of the Earth. Societies exist under common grace covenant with God to promote God's plans for His people. All people's, in a sense, exist for the people of God. In that sense, Tyre was allowed to exist for the sake of Israel. You know, another example is the Roman road system that paved the way for the Gospel spread of the first century. Rome did not know that it existed to help God's people proclaim Jesus. Or Internet and phone apps today. The secular society doesn't know that one of the reasons that they have been allowed to exist is to enable Biblical truth to enter into every closed nation of the Earth.

The infrastructure, lawful order, and multitude of services provided by secular governments exist so that the people of God might fulfill the purpose God has called them to fulfill. That is one of the realities explaining the relationship of the people of God to the peoples of the world. Common grace kingdom exists for the special grace kingdom. But in another sense, special grace kingdom exists for the common grace kingdom. We exist for them. God made a special grace covenant with Abraham, and then with Moses, and now through Jesus with the Church so that through us all the nations of the world might be blessed. We exist to be a city on a hill, so that everybody can hear about the goodness and grace of God. And maybe there is a glimmer of that in the last verse, some effect on Tyre. They are no longer storing or hoarding up for themselves. They bring tribute to the Lord. In these dark times of shadow, human self-sufficiency fails to meet human need. Empires fall. Leaders fail. Systems break down. Society cannot meet our deepest needs. Still, God offers hope to everybody who will turn away from failed human systems and turn to Him as Savior and Lord.

Lesson 12 Isaiah 24-27 The Third Cycle: Two Cities in Contrast: Endurance through to Glory

Introduction

Motyer gives chapters 24-27 a long title, calling this section, “The Third Cycle: Two Cities In Contrast: Endurance Through To Glory.” He emphasizes each part of his title, and I find it helpful. He calls it “The Third Cycle,” connecting these chapters to the two cycles of oracles we just covered in 13-23. But he does not call this “The Third Cycle of Oracles.” So, he intentionally leaves off the word “oracle.” This section doesn’t use the word “oracle.” Still, we can discern a five-part division that parallels our previous two cycles.

The second part of the title, “Two Cities in Contrast,” recognizes the central theme of the whole section of the contrast between the city of chaos and the city of Zion. That is our driving image. We will see that the city of chaos is not a particular city, such as Babylon or Nineveh. Just as the lines were less clearly drawn in the second cycle as compared to the first cycle, the lines are even less concrete in this third cycle. The city of chaos is an abstract representation of all of human civilization. It is the city of man. We are not considering specific nations. The language of this sections wraps all peoples up into one whole. We are looking into the far future: to the end times at the final judgment of human civilization and the establishment of the eternal city of God. Two cities in contrast.

The third part of the title, “The Third Cycle: Two Cities In Contrast: Endurance Through To Glory,” emphasizes God’s redemptive purposes for those who trust Him. A remnant of His people Israel and a remnant of the peoples of the Earth will endure through to glory, to feast with God in His holy city.

I am using Motyer’s structure in this series, grouping together the three cycles of chapters 13-27 as one major section, which he titles “The Universal Kingdom.” None of the other commentaries I have group this section together with the oracles to the nations in 13-23. Just Motyer does that. But I did notice that most of the other commentaries suggest that connection in the titles they use when they break this up into two sections. They all give 13-23 a title having to do with judgment on the nations, and then give 24-27 a title indicating God’s victory.

For example, Knider titles 13-23 “*Messages For The Nations*,” and 24-27, “*God’s final victory*” (*New American Commentary*). Constable titles 13-23, “*Divine Judgments Over The Nations*,” and 24-27, “*Divine Victory Over The Nations*” (*netbible.org*). And Oswalt titles 13-23, “*God’s Judgment On The Nations*,” and 24-27, “*God’s Triumph Over The Nations*” (NICOT). Oswalt notes,

There is an emerging consensus that these chapters cannot be understood independently but must be understood in context with chs. 13–23, as indeed those chapters must be understood in context with these...[This section] sums up the great themes of the preceding segment and puts them in the most glorious settings. Like a finale, the chapters can be read by themselves, but their greatest contribution is made within the total piece.¹⁹

So, Motyer seems to be on solid ground making the connection between our present section and the two previous cycles. When we move linearly down this current passage in 24-27, there is going to be a five-part division that parallels the five oracles of those two previous cycles. But I am going to hold off on looking at that parallel relationship across the three cycles until the beginning of our next lesson.

So, after setting all that up and arguing that there is a parallel, and that there are five sections, I am not going to look at that five-section structure. I am going to wait, because I find it more helpful to first recognize the chiastic structure of this present passage. When reading through these chapters linearly, just straight down the text, there seems to be a lot of jumping around between related ideas, from destruction to remnant, to song, back to destruction, and then another song. It is not easy to get a handle on what Isaiah is doing. But when we recognize the chiastic structure of the text, the well-balanced integrity of the whole passage falls nicely into place.

¹⁹ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 1-39*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 440-441.

I'll give you an overview of the chiastic structure and then discuss the text according to each chiastic pair. Remember that a chiastic structure is a type of inverted parallelism where the first section parallels the last section, the second section parallels the second to last section, and so on. And there may or may not be a central section.

There is a central section in this chiastic passage. Right at the center, the people of God feast with Him in Zion. That feast in Zion is going to be in 25:6-12. That is our central point, and also the hinge around which the two parallel halves of the chiasm swing. I have referred back several times to the image of Zion in chapter 2. That image includes a double pilgrimage. God has judged both the city of man and His own city of Jerusalem: present Jerusalem is under judgment. And as there are two judgments, there are also two remnants: a remnant of faithful Jews and a remnant of seeking Gentiles. And they are both streaming into Zion.

In this passage, the feast in Zion takes central place, and on either side we are going to see parallel descriptions of destruction and pilgrimage. The first half of the passage focuses on the peoples of the Earth. So, the Gentiles who are destroyed and making pilgrimage to Zion, and the second half of the passage focuses on God's people Israel, who are also destroyed and making pilgrimage to Zion.

The chiasm consists of five frames, which I will label A through E and A' through E'. F is our central point. It has no pair. Moving from the outermost frames into the center, A describes the Lord's harvest from a destroyed world, while A' describes the Lord's harvest from a destroyed people. Moving to the second frame, we have in B the song of the world remnant and in B' the song of the remnant of God's people; then C, the sinful world overthrown, and C', spiritual forces of evil overthrown; then D, the waiting world, and D', the waiting people of God. And finally, on either side of the central feast in Zion we have E, the song of the ruined city, and E', the song of the strong city. If you'd like a visual to help you see the structure, I have included a chart of the chiasm in the structure charts on the Isaiah resources page at observetheword.com. If you go there, download the pdf or the powerpoint and you can see the chiasm.

- A¹ - The Lord's Harvest From A Destroyed World (24:1-13)
 - Destruction (1-12)
 - Gleanings (13)
- B¹ - The Song Of The World Remnant (24:14-16a)
- C¹ - The Sinful World Overthrown (24:16b-20)
 - D¹ - The Waiting World (24:21-23)
 - E¹ - The Song Of The Ruined City (25:1-5)
 - F - MOUNT ZION (25:6-12)
 - E² - The Song Of The Strong City (26:1-6)
 - D² - The Waiting People Of God (26:7-21)
- C² - Spiritual Forces Of Evil Overthrown (27:1)
- B² - The Song Of The Remnant Of The People (27:2-6)
- A² - The Lord's Harvest From A Destroyed People (27:7-13)
 - Destruction (7-11)
 - Gleanings (12-13)²⁰

This pattern will come into view better by addressing the text in pairs, so that's what we're going to do. This is different from my normal linear movement down through the text. We start with A, the beginning of the passage, and A', the end of the passage. So, we are starting with the beginning and the end. These two sections are titled, "The Lord's Harvest From A Destroyed World," and "The Lord's Harvest From A Destroyed People."

A and A' - The Lord's Harvest from a Destroyed World and the Lord's Harvest from a Destroyed People (24:1-13 and 27:7-13)

²⁰ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 194-195.

Remember that the first element of each pair is always going to focus on the world of the Gentiles, and the second element of each pair is going to focus on God's people Israel. In both A and A' we begin with an image of destruction and end with an image of gleaning the remaining fruit after the harvest. The Lord's harvest from a destroyed world is in 24:1-13. The destruction is in verses 1-12, and the harvest is in verse 13. So, here we go, Isaiah 24:1-12.

A: The Lord's Harvest from a Destroyed World (24:1-13)

- ¹ Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface and scatters its inhabitants.
² And the people will be like the priest, the servant like his master, the maid like her mistress, the buyer like the seller, the lender like the borrower, the creditor like the debtor.
³ The earth will be completely laid waste and completely despoiled, for the LORD has spoken this word.
⁴ The earth mourns *and* withers, the world fades *and* withers, the exalted of the people of the earth fade away.
⁵ The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant.
⁶ Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty. Therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left.
⁷ The new wine mourns, The vine decays, All the merry-hearted sigh.
⁸ The gaiety of tambourines ceases, The noise of revelers stops, The gaiety of the harp ceases.
⁹ They do not drink wine with song; Strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.
¹⁰ The city of chaos is broken down; Every house is shut up so that none may enter.
¹¹ There is an outcry in the streets concerning the wine; All joy turns to gloom.
The gaiety of the earth is banished.
¹² Desolation is left in the city And the gate is battered to ruins.

The section begins, "Behold, the Lord lays the earth waste" and continues on with a description of devastation. No one holds any title over another, "the servant becomes like the master and the maid just like mistress," because there is no civilization left to establish difference. Everyone is laid low together. This is not one nation. It is the whole Earth, "The earth mourns and withers...the exalted people of the earth fade away." Verse 5 describes the Earth as polluted by the immoral behavior of its inhabitants. That image takes us back to the conquest of Canaan. The Amorites were given an extra 400 years before their moral pollution forced the land to spit them out (Genesis 15:16). Leviticus 18:24-28 warned the people of Israel that if they defiled the land, it would spew them out as well.

I do not think the reference to eternal covenant in verse 5 refers to the Mosaic covenant. I think the reference takes us further back, to the common grace covenant first established with Adam and then renewed through Noah and applying to all of his descendants. The Earth had become polluted by the immorality, injustice, and pride of humanity. So, God washed the land clean. Looking ahead to the end of time we do not see another flood, but we do see another judgment and for the same reason. Humankind has broken covenant with God through immorality, injustice, and pride. I think this breaking of statutes is breaking of the moral law that, in some sense, is in every human heart. As a result, "the city of chaos is broken down...desolation is left in the city and the gate is battered to ruins."

That's the destruction of humanity. And it is comprehensive but not absolute. It looks absolute. But verse 13 refers to a gleaning after the harvest of judgment.

- ¹³ For thus it will be in the midst of the earth among the peoples,
As the shaking of an olive tree, As the gleanings when the grape harvest is over.

There is a little bit of hope here. The devastation of human civilization will look like an olive orchard whose trees have all been shaken out, and a vineyard after the harvesters have finished their work. There is nothing left. Well, almost nothing. The harvester has left some olives and grapes to be gleaned. And that gleaning, those leftover olives and grapes, that is going to be our remnant.

A': The Lord's Harvest From A Destroyed People (27:7-13)

Moving to the end of our passage, 27:7-13 also depicts destruction followed by gleaning. But this destruction applies to God's people. Isaiah begins with a question, and it reminds me of Paul's question in Romans 11:11, "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall did they?" It's not quite the same question, but listen how it starts with a question. This is Isaiah 27:7-11.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 7 Like the striking of Him who has struck them,
has He struck them? | Or like the slaughter of His slain,
have they been slain? |
| 8 You contended with them by banishing them,
by driving them away. | With His fierce wind He has expelled <i>them</i>
on the day of the east wind. |
| 9 Therefore through this Jacob's iniquity
will be forgiven;
When he makes all the altar stones | And this will be the full price of the pardoning
of his sin:
like pulverized chalk stones; |
| <i>When Asherim and incense altars will not stand.</i> | |
| 10 For the fortified city is isolated,
There the calf will graze, | A homestead forlorn and forsaken like the desert;
And there it will lie down and feed on its branches. |
| 11 When its limbs are dry, they are broken off;
For they are not a people of discernment,
Therefore their Maker will not have compassion
on them. | Women come <i>and</i> make a fire with them,
And their Creator will not be gracious to them. |

Has God struck Israel? Has he slain His people? Not exactly. Though many fall in the judgment executed on Israel and Judah, the majority were exiled, banished. The earlier language from 24:5 said the people of the Earth were destroyed for filling it with moral pollution. The text here in verse 8 says, "with his fierce wind he has expelled them." Because of their immorality they are spit out of the land. The forgiveness, the pardoning of Jacob will come about after a cleansing of the land in which altar stones are pulverized. The Canaanite Asherim and incense altars must be torn down. And I don't think Isaiah goes on to explain how the forgiveness and pardon comes about. In fact, we are waiting really to get into that in our middle section of the book of Isaiah.

The fortified city here in 27:10 is most likely the same idea as the city of chaos in 24:10. Israel has been banished. But there is no security in the cultures to which they have been expelled. They may have been expelled to a fortified city, but the fortified city, the city of man, will also become forlorn and forsaken, like the ruins of a city in the desert. The city now hosts calves who come to graze on the branches of its trees. The calves strip branches off their bark. Women then break off the branches for firewood. All is dry and dead. This is a deserted city.

Why? Because they are not a people of discernment. Implied is man's arrogant rejection of God. They scoff at God's call. They insist on their own way. It is a futile choice. Polluted in heart and depraved of mind, the way mankind devises for himself leaves a trail of broken relationships and damaged souls. And they don't have the discernment to recognize the justice of God's punishment, or even to recognize the consequence of their own sin. So, they don't see the wholesomeness of God's way and they continue to steadfastly refuse Him. They have no discernment. So, we read in verse 11, "Therefore, their Maker will not have compassion on them. And their Creator will not be gracious to them." God, whose name is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger (Exodus 34:6), has brought wrath onto His people and then also onto the world city where they have been exiled, because they have turned their backs on His compassion. In wrath, He punishes, though in wrath He also intends that some may be saved. Maybe there will be some who get it, who get the devastation wrought by their own sin, that they have brought this wrath on themselves. Maybe there will be some who turn to believe. The gleaning of verses 12 and 13 envision a believing remnant.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>¹² In that day
the LORD will start <i>His</i> threshing</p> <p>and you will be gathered up</p> <p>¹³ It will come about also in that day
and those who were perishing in the land
of Assyria will come
and worship the LORD</p> | <p>from the flowing stream of the Euphrates
to the brook of Egypt,
one by one, O sons of Israel.
that a great trumpet will be blown,
and who were scattered in the land of Egypt
in the holy mountain at Jerusalem.</p> |
|--|---|

The focus here is on the sons of Israel, scattered throughout from down south in Egypt to up north in Assyria. The people of God exiled among the city of man are called to make a pilgrimage back to the city of God.

B and B' - The Song Of The World Remnant and The Song Of The Remnant Of The People Of God (24:14–16a and 27:2–6)

Moving to the first inner frame of the passage B and B', we come to songs of the remnant, first the world remnant and then the remnant of God's people. This is B: The Song Of The World Remnant in 24:14-16a.

B: The Song Of The World Remnant (24:14–16a)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>¹⁴ They raise their voices, they shout for joy;</p> <p>¹⁵ Therefore glorify the LORD in the east,
In the coastlands of the sea.</p> <p>^{16a} From the ends of the earth</p> | <p>They cry out from the west concerning the
majesty of the LORD.
The name of the LORD, the God of Israel,
we hear songs, "Glory to the Righteous One,"</p> |
|---|---|

"They" are the remnant that come from the gleaning that was left over after the destruction of the world. Robert Alter translates verse 14 this way, "It is they who shall raise their voice, sing gladly." "We have a glad song" contrasts in verse 11 where "there is an outcry in the streets concerning the wine; all joy turns to gloom." This joyful song may come from a small remnant, but it is still a global remnant. It sounds from east and west, "Glorify Yahweh, the God of Israel!" Verse 16 reminds me of Jesus' words in Acts 1:8 when he tells the Apostles that they are going to be empowered by the Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth. Isaiah writes in 16a, "From the ends of the earth we hear songs." This is the fulfillment of the ministry of the Apostles. They go out to gather the remnant. And that remnant is going to come in, singing "Glory to the Righteous One."

This is The Song Of The World Remnant. Now, let us consider The Song Of The Remnant Of The People Of God. B' is in 27:2-6.

B': The Song Of The Remnant Of The People Of God (27:2–6)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>² In that day,
³ "I, the LORD, am its keeper;
So that no one will damage it,
⁴ "I have no wrath.</p> <p><i>Then</i> I would step on them,
⁵ "Or let him rely on My protection,
⁶ In the days to come Jacob will take root,
And they will fill the whole world with fruit.</p> | <p>"A vineyard of wine, sing of it!
I water it every moment.
I guard it night and day.
Should someone give Me briars <i>and</i> thorns
in battle,
I would burn them completely.
Let him make peace with Me,
Let him make peace with Me."
Israel will blossom and sprout,
And they will fill the whole world with fruit.</p> |
|---|---|

Do you remember when we spoke of the vineyard, and God is the vinedresser, God is the keeper of the vineyard. Remember when that happened? This first verse delivers the imperative, "A vineyard of wine, sing of it!" The last line declares, "Jacob will take root, Israel will blossom and sprout, and they will fill the whole world with fruit!" So, this song of the remnant is a song about a vineyard, and it's a fruitful vineyard. There is good wine, and it fills the world with fruit. It contrasts the vineyard

that came before. It was in chapter 5. It was the vineyard that produced stink-fruit. God cared for that vineyard, but finally gave up since there was no response to His grace. Here, God's care for the vineyard, watering every moment, guarding day by day produces healthy vines. They take root and they grow, and they produce good fruit. In chapter 5, God's wrath descends on Judah. God declares over this vineyard, "I have no wrath." Instead, His anger turns against briars and thorns that try to infest His vineyard's cultivated ground, but those who would rely on the protection of the Lord, those who would trust in Him, He says, "Let them make peace with me! Let them make peace with me!" and enjoy His care; to enjoy Him as the One who watches over and provides for His vineyard.

C and C' - The Sinful World Overthrown and Spiritual Forces Of Evil Overthrown (24:16b–20 and 27:1)

So far, in the beginning and the end we encountered the destruction of the world and the destruction of Israel. Both of those destructions were followed by the gleaning of a remnant. That outer frame was followed by a first inner frame of paired songs sung by a remnant. In the next frame, C and C', we return to judgment. In C, the sinful world is overthrown. Then in C', the spiritual forces of evil are overthrown. First, the overthrow of the sinful world. This is 24:16b-20.

C: The Sinful World Overthrown (24:16b–20)

<p>^{16b} But I say, "Woe to me! Woe to me! Alas for me!</p> <p>¹⁷ Terror and pit and snare</p> <p>¹⁸ Then it will be that he who flees the report of disaster And he who climbs out of the pit For the windows above are opened,</p> <p>¹⁹ The earth is broken asunder,</p> <p>²⁰ The earth reels to and fro like a drunkard For its transgression is heavy upon it,</p>	<p>The treacherous deal treacherously, and the treacherous deal very treacherously." Confront you, O inhabitant of the earth. will fall into the pit, will be caught in the snare; and the foundations of the earth shake. The earth is split through, The earth is shaken violently. And it totters like a shack, And it will fall, never to rise again.</p>
---	---

Verse 18 gives us that narrative movement of the inhabitants of the Earth fleeing from the inevitable. "Terror and pit and snare..." And then we get, if you run and fall into a pit and even manage to climb out of the pit, you will be caught by the snare, like a rabbit in a trap. The Earth here is all human civilization. "It will fall, never to rise again." God has triumphed.

C': Spiritual Forces Of Evil Overthrown (27:1)

We move from the Earth to the heavenly places in C': Spiritual forces of evil overthrown. This is 27:1.

<p>¹ In that day the LORD will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent,</p>	<p>With His fierce and great and mighty sword, Even Leviathan the twisted serpent; And He will kill the dragon who <i>lives</i> in the sea.</p>
---	---

What is this? This is interesting. We should have already read 24:21 if we were going through it linearly, but since I am following the chiastic pairs from outside in, we haven't yet. We will get to 24:21 in the next frame. There, we read of God's punishment against hosts on high and kings of the Earth. So, we actually have already been set up for thinking of spiritual forces. And we have both of those in C and C'. First, the Earth falls, now the powers in the heavenly realms fall, referred to here as Leviathan. And that is a recognizable image in the ancient Near East.

According to Robert Alter, "The entire line invokes the Canaanite myth of Leviathan as the primordial sea monster that the weather god Baal must subdue in order for dry land, safe from the raging sea, to come into being."²¹ So the separation of water from land requires this act of warfare in the heavenly realms. It's a common element of creation myth in the ancient Near East, whether the

²¹ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1823.

names are Leviathan and Baal, or maybe you’ve heard of Tiamat and Marduk, whatever the name; the storm god defeats the supernatural sea monster, who is one with the chaos of the sea. And it is quite possible that the reference in Genesis 1:2 of the Spirit hovering over the water, it’s not about the ancient myth, but the way of using that language seems to include a rejection of ancient myth. It is the Spirit of God. It is God Himself who is going to bring order out of chaos. And He is going to separate land from sea. He is the one that calls into being that which was not. He is the one who shines light into the darkness. So, this false view is in the background in the ancient Near East, and it’s in the background in Biblical story sometimes but here it is being drawn in.

Leviathan, with its connection to the sea, represents supernatural chaos. That was a common image: the sea and chaos go together. In 24:10 Isaiah referred to human civilization as “the city of chaos.” Isaiah employs the myth of Leviathan to briefly, but powerfully, refer to the powers of darkness. Our focus is on God’s judgment of wicked humanity. But here, briefly at least, we are reminded that the struggle for righteousness is not just against flesh and blood but is also against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12). Isaiah is not going to get into explaining those spiritual forces of wickedness. He is just giving us a short reference to remind us of their reality and of God’s victory over them those forces.

The verse uses the word “serpent” twice. That is the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 3:1 for the serpent that tempted Eve, so that’s interesting. A third verset uses the word “dragon,” which could also be interpreted as “monster.” We have, then, a fleeing serpent, a twisting serpent, and the dragon in the sea. The adjectives “fleeing” and “twisting” are not easily translated. We could use different adjectives there. It’s not really clear in the Hebrew. Motyer sees three different powers in the text. “Fleeing” could also mean “gliding,” which Motyer takes to be “flying.” “Twisting” could suggest the movement of a snake on the ground. He interprets the three as beings of air – the gliding serpent; of Earth – the twisting serpent; and of sea – the monster of the sea, or the dragon.

I think only one power is in mind here. You can take each verset as contributing to a sense of movement. Leviathan flees - or glides - flees, twists, moves through the waters of the sea. So, we are not seeing three different powers: we are envisioning the movement of this one power. Oswalt agrees with that. He quotes an Ugaritic verse that uses this same threefold form to reference one monster. It was translated with older English language, “If you smite Lotan the serpent slant/ Destroy the serpent tortuous/Shalyat of the seven heads...”²² It sounds great that way, but that’s from an Ugaritic myth about Leviathan, and it’s the same: a three-part repetition of the same monster. I think that’s what’s going on here.

But whether we are speaking of three powers or one power, the sword of God with its threefold description of fierce, great, and mighty – that’s His sword – it’s going to slay the Beast when God brings an end to the chaos of moral rebellion fomented on Earth. He is going to defeat both human and spiritual powers. God triumphs.

D and D’ - The Waiting World and The Waiting People Of God (24:21–23 and 26:7–21)

Moving inward to the next frame, D presents the waiting world and D’, the waiting people of God. First, the waiting world. This is short, only three verses, 24:21-23.

D: The Waiting World (24:21–23)

- ²¹ So it will happen in that day, That the LORD will punish the host of heaven on high,
And the kings of the earth on earth.
- ²² They will be gathered together *like* prisoners And will be confined in prison;
in the dungeon,
- And after many days they *will be* punished.
- ²³ Then the moon will be abashed and For the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and
the sun ashamed, in Jerusalem and *His* glory will be before His elders.

²² Oswalt, 491.

Here is that reference to host of heaven and kings of Earth. Both will be punished, confined in a prison. The verset “and after many days they will be punished” does not necessarily mean that they will be punished many days after being confined to prison. If we are reading it linearly, that could work. I take it to be a restatement telling us something about the punishment. They will be punished. After many days, they will be punished, they will be thrown into prison. The restatement is adding the element of time. They will be punished, but not right away. After many days. I think that’s the way to take that.

Following that punishment, God will reveal Himself in glory on Mount Zion. My English translation does not catch what Isaiah emphasizes when he says, “the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed.” Isaiah did not use the normal words in Hebrew for Sun and Moon. He used poetic references. The Moon is “the white one,” and the Sun is “the hot one”. So, he is emphasizing in his references the brightness – “the white one” and “the hot one” – the brightness of the Sun and the Moon. And what are they embarrassed or ashamed of? They are embarrassed of how dim they look in comparison to the glory of the Lord shining from Jerusalem on Mount Zion. It’s a wonderful piece of poetry right there.

D’: - *The Waiting People Of God (26:7–21)*

So in this D, the powers of the world await punishment. In D’, the people of God wait for the glory of His presence. This passage is longer, 15 verses. Listen for the overall sense of the message as the faithful wait for the Lord to complete His work of judgment, to punish the powers of the Earth. This is 26:7-21.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>7 The way of the righteous is smooth;</p> <p>8 Indeed, <i>while following</i> the way of Your judgments,
O LORD,
Your name, even Your memory,</p> <p>9 At night my soul longs for You,
For when the earth experiences Your judgments</p> <p>10 <i>Though</i> the wicked is shown favor,
He deals unjustly in the land of uprightness,</p> <p>11 O LORD, Your hand is lifted up <i>yet</i>
They see <i>Your</i> zeal for the people and are put
to shame;</p> <p>12 LORD, You will establish peace for us,
13 O LORD our God, other masters besides You
have ruled us;</p> <p>14 The dead will not live,
Therefore You have punished and destroyed them,</p> <p>15 You have increased the nation, O LORD,
You have extended all the borders of the land.</p> <p>16 O LORD, they sought You in distress;
Your chastening was upon them.</p> <p>17 As the pregnant woman approaches <i>the time</i>
to give birth,</p> <p>18 We were pregnant, we writhed <i>in labor</i>, we gave
birth, as it seems, <i>only</i> to wind.</p> <p>19 Your dead will live; their corpses will rise.
For your dew <i>is as</i> the dew of the dawn,</p> <p>20 Come, my people, enter into your rooms</p> | <p>O Upright One, make the path of the righteous level.</p> <p>We have waited for You eagerly;</p> <p>is the desire of <i>our</i> souls.</p> <p>Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently;
The inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.
He does not learn righteousness;
And does not preserve (should be perceive)
the majesty of the LORD.</p> <p>they do not see it.
Indeed, fire will devour Your enemies.</p> <p>Since You have also performed for us all our works.
<i>But</i> through You alone we confess Your name.</p> <p>the departed spirits will not rise;
And You have wiped out all remembrance of them.</p> <p>You have increased the nation, You are glorified;</p> <p>They could only whisper a prayer,
Your chastening was upon them.</p> <p>She writhes <i>and</i> cries out in her labor pains,</p> <p>Thus were we before You, O LORD.</p> <p>We could not accomplish deliverance for the earth,
Nor were inhabitants of the world born.</p> <p>You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy,
And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.</p> <p>And close your doors behind you;</p> |
|---|--|

<p>Hide for a little while ²¹ For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place And the earth will reveal her bloodshed</p>	<p>Until indignation runs <i>its</i> course. To punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; And will no longer cover her slain.</p>
--	--

God must punish wickedness. And we who are faithful must wait for it. It happens in God's timing, not in our timing. So, we know it's going to happen. They must wait for punishment. We must wait for justice.

There is much to notice here. I am going to mention just four things. First, this faithful remnant delights in God, saying, "You are the desire of our souls." Second, this faithful remnant acknowledges their dependence on God, "We could not accomplish deliverance for the earth... You have performed for us all our works." Third, they are promised that God will grant life. They gave birth to the wind, but they say of God, "Your dead will live... you who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy!" And fourth, patience is encouraged. "Hide for a little while... The Lord is about to come."

E and E' - The Song Of The Ruined City and The Song Of The Strong City (25:1-5 and 26:1-6)

We come now to the final inner frame before reaching the central point. And we encounter two more songs of exaltation. The first is the song of the ruin city and the second is the song of the strong city. So, this is E, the song of the ruined city, 25:1-5.

E: The Song Of The Ruined City (25:1-5)

<p>¹ O LORD, You are my God; For You have worked wonders, ² For You have made a city into a heap, A palace of strangers is a city no more, ³ Therefore a strong people will glorify You; ⁴ For You have been a defense for the helpless, A refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat;</p>	<p>I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; Plans <i>formed</i> long ago, with perfect faithfulness. A fortified city into a ruin; It will never be rebuilt. Cities of ruthless nations will revere You. A defense for the needy in his distress, For the breath of the ruthless is like a <i>rain storm against</i> a wall.</p>
<p>⁵ Like heat in drought, You subdue the uproar of aliens; <i>like</i> heat by the shadow of a cloud,</p>	<p>the song of the ruthless is silenced.</p>

When I read verse 2, "You have made a city a heap and a fortified city into a ruin," I am thinking of that theme through this whole passage of the destruction of the city of man. And I am reminded of a passage from the Greek general Xenophon. Xenophon wrote about coming upon ancient ruins of a massive city that was left uninhabited, millions of sunbaked bricks crumbling into dust. Xenophon had been hired to fight in a Persian civil war. The year was 400 BC. Being on the losing end, he and his 10,000 Greek soldiers fled back to Greece passing through Mesopotamia. On their way, they happened upon this vast, deserted city, only inhabited by scattered nomads and random villagers. But judging by the miles and miles of city wall, hundreds of thousands, possibly a million citizens had lived there once. It was quite a shocking sight to come upon in the wilderness. It's something you expect after a zombie apocalypse. The city was larger and as technologically advanced as anything Xenophon had seen in his travels from Persia to Athens, but he didn't know who built it and he didn't know it was there. He just happens on it.

He asked the natives who built the city. They said, "The Medes." But that is only because the memory of the Assyrian empire had been completely lost, even to those few who remained living right here, at the heart of that former empire. Barely 200 years on and nobody even remembers that they built this enormous city nor that they ruled a vast empire from this spot.

Xenophon was describing the ruins of Nineveh. He measured the base of the walls to be 50 feet wide and 50 feet high, just the base, 15 by 15 meters. And there was still another 100 feet, or 30 meters, of brick wall still standing on top of that base. There were homes, and temples, and palaces, and courts, and streets intact.

Dan Carlin, in his *Hardcore History* podcast called it, “the ultimate Statue-of-Liberty-in-the-sand moment (episode 56, *King of Kings*, 1:40:40).” He is referring to the end of the first Planet of the Apes movie, the old version, and we’re on what we thought was some foreign planet, and the camera pans across the barren plain and suddenly we see, sticking out of the sand, a third of the Statue of Liberty. It’s like, oh my gosh! Where’s New York? It’s gone, and there is just the Lady holding up the flame. But not only is the city gone: the whole memory is gone. And for us today it’s sort of unthinkable.

Just as it would have been unthinkable to anyone in Isaiah’s time that Assyria would be so devastated by the Babylonians and Medes that the great city Nineveh, in 200 years, this general is going to be walking in the wilderness and he’s going to come by these great walls and all these towering buildings, and he is going to have no idea where does this come from. Who built this? O, Lord God...

² For You have made a city into a heap, A palace of strangers is a city no more,	A fortified city into a ruin; It will never be rebuilt.
--	--

In the end, all of our works are vanity. In the previous passage the people of God said, “We were giving birth as if we were giving birth to the wind. What did we really produce of eternal value? Our works, God, are nothing. You have to do our works for us if it’s to last, if it’s to be of worth.”

So, in this passage, the strong are going to be forced to glorify God. It’s that every knee shall bow, whether you want to or not. So maybe not out of a yielding heart, but out of the grudging respect that a powerful people is going to attribute to the might of the One who has completely destroyed their unconquerable army. Humanity must realize at some point how small we really are. The ruthless must acknowledge the strength of God in the last day, when they see the helpless and needy, all those that they have oppressed, gathered behind God, under His protection. Those who were such an easy mark of oppression are defenseless and vulnerable no more.

The city of man has fallen. Its walls and palaces, its marketplace and theaters stand in ruin. Business, politics, sport, academics, art - it will all be forgotten. Man’s works will be consumed with fire. And that which is gold and good, the gems and the silver will pass through the fire. Everything else is burned up. Our Towers of Babel don’t stand; our monuments to ourselves. God has overcome the ruthless and the wicked. So sings the remnant as they make their way on pilgrimage to Zion. The plans God formed long ago He has worked out with perfect faithfulness.

E’: The Song Of The Strong City (26:1–6)

The strong city is God’s city. This is E’: The Song Of The Strong City, 26:1-6.

¹ In that day this song will be sung “We have a strong city; ² “Open the gates, The one that remains faithful. ³ “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, ⁴ “Trust in the LORD forever, ⁵ “For He has brought low those who dwell on high, He lays it low, He lays it low to the ground, ⁶ “The foot will trample it,	in the land of Judah: He sets up walls and ramparts for security. that the righteous nation may enter, Because he trusts in You. For in GOD the LORD, <i>we have</i> an everlasting Rock. the unassailable city; He casts it to the dust. The feet of the afflicted, the steps of the helpless.”
--	--

God is the rock. God is the strong fortress. You run to Him.

F - Mount Zion (25:6–12)

Finally, we come to the central passage. The singing pilgrims enter Zion, welcomed to the feast of the Lord, 25:6-12.

- ⁶ And the LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, *and* refined, aged wine. ⁷ And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations. ⁸ He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ And it will be said in that day,
- “Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.”
- ¹⁰ For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain, And Moab will be trodden down in his place
As straw is trodden down in the water of a manure pile.
- ¹¹ And he will spread out his hands in the middle of it As a swimmer spreads out *his hands* to swim,
But *the Lord* will lay low his pride together with the trickery of his hands.
- ¹² The unassailable fortifications of your walls He will Lay low *and* cast to the ground, even to the dust.
bring down,

The feast is an image of joy and of relationship, sitting down together with God at a lavish meal. The wine is not just aged. It is aged and refined. I am reminded of the choice wine Jesus produced at the wedding He attended and of His later parables that depicted the Kingdom of God as a wedding feast. This is God inviting us to experience relationship with Him, and it's joyful and it's abundant.

The text says that God swallowed up the covering which is over all peoples. I assume that is the curse of death that hangs over us all. In earlier chapters, it was Sheol that swallowed up the dead. Here it is God who swallows up death. What a powerful reversal. New Testament authors pick up on Isaiah's language here. In 1 Corinthians 15:54, speaking of our imperishable, resurrected bodies, Paul quotes Isaiah declaring, "Death is swallowed up." Also in Revelation 21:4, describing the new Heaven and new Earth, John quotes Isaiah, assuring us, "[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The believer is the one who has waited for the promises of the Lord to be realized. Isaiah proclaims, "This is our God for whom we have waited that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited." As we enter into the feast, we will know that our waiting is over. Our hope is realized. So he says, "Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

The victory of God has two sides. It means peace and joy for those who have entered into the feast; and it means loss for the wicked who persisted in rebellion. In this passage, the faithful have entered in. Moab, like the older brother, chose to remain outside. Moab is not singled out as worse than any other rebellious nation. There is a literary connection, I mentioned this earlier, between the three cycles that we are going to look at in our next lesson. The oracle to Moab is going to be parallel to this passage. So, Moab gets to be the concrete example of those left outside the wedding feast by their arrogant refusal to enter into relationship with God.

And the image is shocking. God's hand rests on His mountain, the place where He feasts with the faithful. But His foot stamps Moab down into the latrine. After being cast into the manure, Moab, the epitome of self-reliant humanity, spreads out his hands in the middle of it to swim himself to safety. That is the image of man's self-sufficiency. And it is that very arrogant self-assurance that seals Moab's fate. He will not say, "Lord save me." God does not respect the cleverness of his hands and his futile attempts to try to swim through the manure. The fortifications of his own worldly achievements are going to crumble to dust. That is the city of man. It will be fully forgotten. Mankind, you cannot yourself! And yet, Moab will not be saved by another.

Two cities stand in contrast. The city of man and the city of God. The city of man will descend back into the primordial chaos, back to where the Spirit was hovering over the waters. It will be desolate and forgotten. But those who trust in the Lord wait faithfully for the completion of His purposes, and they will endure through to glory, and they will feast with Him in His city, a strong city of peace and light that has no end. That is the hope of your salvation. Let us rejoice and be glad in Him!

Lesson 13 Isaiah 28 A Simple Message for Halls of Power

Introduction

I zoomed out to focus on the bigger picture during our consideration of chapters 13-27. We addressed the text, but in bigger sections, not verset by verset. I'm going to zoom back in on chapter 28 because I really like this passage and because Isaiah is here making a significant shift to the fourth major section of *the Book of the King*. I want to emphasize that shift. Motyer makes that shift clear in his chapter divisions. He recognizes 13-27 as the third major section in the Book of the King titled, *The Universal Kingdom*, and then for a fourth major section of the book he groups chapters 28-37 and calls it, *The Lord of History*. In *The Universal Kingdom* section, Isaiah focused our attention on all of humankind as he moved from oracles concerning specific nations, to oracles concerning symbolic nations, to the universal city of man. In that major section, Isaiah has already showed God to be the one whose plans inevitably come to pass. He is the Lord of history. In this section, which we are calling "*The Lord of History*," Isaiah digs into a real-life example from his own ministry of how God is sovereign over the nations, and in doing that he supports his vision of God's plan we have seen working with all the nations through all time, to the end of this present heaven and earth.

Considering this series of events in Isaiah's life gives support to the prophecy that he has just given us about the future. As we make this shift from the *Universal Kingdom* to a particular example of God working as the *Lord of History*, I am going to first review major themes suggested by the unusual structure of chapters 13-27. Then we will get into the specifics of chapter 28. So, first, five themes of the *Universal Kingdom*.

Five Themes of the Universal Kingdom

In our last lesson, I focused on the chiasmic structure of chapters 24-27 as the best way to see the contrast between the city of man and Zion, the city of God. Once you recognize the chiasmic parallels that move us from judgment to hope and back again, it becomes easier to read the text straight through in a linear fashion. Reading 24-27 straight through, we can recognize a five-part division that parallels the five-part division in the two cycles of oracles.

Remember, we divided chapters 13-27 into three cycles of five. In chapters 13-20, we had one cycle of five oracles. In chapters 21-23, we had a second cycle of five oracles. And in 24-27, even though we don't five oracles we can see a five-part division. Imagine those three cycles lined up in three columns beside each other. You have cycle 1, cycle 2, cycle 3 – three columns of five: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 going down; and then another 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; and then another 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then imaging moving across row 1, and so you're considering the first oracle or passage in each cycle. And then we can move across row 2, considering the second oracle or passage in each cycle. Then row 3, row 4, row 5. That's what we are going to do. Following Motyer, we are going to move horizontally across each cycle to draw out one significant theme from each row.²³ So, we will have five themes.

Row 1 of the three cycles

Okay! So, moving across the first row of our three cycles, we began the first cycle with the overthrow of Babylon, that massive cultural center that represents human political strength. Then the first oracle of the second cycle again described Babylon's destruction, this time emphasizing the demise of human religion as Babylon's gods fell. In 24:1-20, the first passage of our third cycle, the destruction of all human civilization is depicted as the fall of a city, "the city of chaos is broken down."

Each case is an example of the destruction of the city of man, and in each case, there is the depicted a survival of the remnant of God's people. That provides us with our first summary principle.

(1) The Lord's people are preserved in a crashing world.

²³ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 196.

Row 2 of the three cycles

Looking across the second row, we began with the second oracle of the first cycle with advice to Philistia that during a period of judgment they should seek refuge in the city of the Lord. In the second oracle of the second cycle, we asked the night watchman how long and he told us, "Come back again." Then in 24:21-23, the second passage of our third cycle, we are told that "after many days" the spiritual and earthly powers of evil will be punished. Then the glory of the Lord will shine in Zion, so bright as to put the Sun and Moon to shame. In each case, there is a period of waiting, and that suggests to us a second summary principle.

(2) God's promises are certain even when they seem to delay.

Row 3 of the three cycles

Now moving across the third row, we began with Moab in crisis, choosing the way of self-reliance. In the third oracle of the second cycle, refugees fled into the wilderness of Kedar after the end of the empire, which had given temporary, collective, human security. In both cases, in Moab and Kedar, only a few remained (16:14, 21:17). In 25:1-12, the third passage of our third cycle, the few who remain are the remnant welcomed into Zion. And as in the first cycle, the Moabites are mentioned in the third as representatives of the folly of human self-sufficiency. They are left outside the feast hall. God's feast in Zion contrasted with the failure of human effort provides our third summary principle.

(3) Human desire for satisfaction and security can only be met by setting aside the illusion of self-sufficiency and submitting to the joy of relationship with God in Zion.

Row 4 of the three cycles

In the fourth row, we see the people of God. We began in the first cycle with unfaithful Israel who sought security with Syria. In that oracle, the city of Damascus is removed, and the strong cities of Israel are forsaken. In the fourth oracle of the second cycle, unfaithful Judah experienced the devastation of Jerusalem. Trusting in their own abilities and plans, they frantically tore down houses to repair Jerusalem's walls and redirect the water flow to create a new cistern in their crisis, all to no avail. Then, in 26:1-21, the fourth passage of the third cycle, the faithful remnant find themselves inside the strong city whose peace is guaranteed by the presence of God, the divine Rock of their salvation. And so, we get our fourth summary principle.

(4) The people of God, though caught up in the turmoil of human history, already live in the strong city, through relationship with God our Rock.

Row 5 of the three cycles

And now the final row, the oracle concerning Egypt surprised us in the first cycle with a declaration that Egypt and Assyria would share the inheritance of God equally with Israel. Then in the fifth oracle of the second cycle, a cycle almost devoid of any hope at all, the last word on Tyre is that she would provide tribute to the Lord. And finally in 27:1-13, the last passage of the third cycle ends with a threshing from the flowing stream of the Euphrates, so up there in Assyria, to the brook of Egypt, and it represents a gathering in of Israel from the nations. Our fifth summary principle is this.

(5) God plans to gather to Himself a remnant from every people, nation, tongue and tribe.

A broad overview of Isaiah's consideration of the universal human kingdom provides us with these five themes: these five principles of faith.

- (1) The Lord's people are preserved in a crashing world.
- (2) God's promises are certain even when they seem to delay.
- (3) Human desire for satisfaction and security can only be met by setting aside the illusion of self-sufficiency and submitting to the joy of relationship with God in Zion.
- (4) The people of God, though caught up in the turmoil of human history, already live in a strong city, through relationship with God our Rock.
- (5) God will gather to Himself a remnant from every people, nation, tongue and tribe.

Isaiah expects the leaders of Judah to make policy for the nation based on these principles of faith. But it is one thing to say we believe these things will happen in the far future to later generations, and another thing to actually plan our lives around these beliefs.

So, Isaiah returns to contemporary events to remind his readers of something most of them have lived through, if not them, then surely their parents. Isaiah finished putting together his masterwork after the invasion of Assyria. But he lived through it and he ministered to the nation under Hezekiah during that invasion. These things are written here to remind Judah that faith in God is not only for the future. Faith in God is for now. We have so recently experienced a major illustration in our own nation of God protecting us, God being our rock and security. So, if that has just happened, shouldn't we also live with it and expect it to be true of the future? That God is sovereign, and we can trust Him, and we can build our lives on Him.

In chapter 28, we have backed up a little bit to give context. Hezekiah will stand firm against Sennacherib when his forces surround Jerusalem. We will get to that part of the story in chapter 36. But before Hezekiah takes a stand with God as his rock, he sent emissaries to Egypt to agree upon a mutual covenant to ensure security against Assyria. And he did that without Isaiah's support. Isaiah is against that move. Isaiah sees the leaders of Judah giving lip service to God while seeking security in their own political scheming. Looking to Egypt for salvation is no different than when Ahaz looked to Assyria for protection from the Israel-Syria alliance. We know how that worked out. Now Assyria is the problem.

Chapter 28 is the first of six woes that make up the structure of this major section, *The Lord of History*. I will address the big picture structure in our next lesson. For now, I am ready to get into the text.

I'll divide the text into two halves, each of which divide into two sub-sections. Isaiah starts by revealing Ephraim's folly in 1-13, and then in 14-29 calls for the leaders of Judah to hear the word of the Lord. In the first sub-section of Ephraim's folly, the false glory of Israel fades while the faithful remnant recognizes that the Lord is their true glory. This first sub-section is in 28:1-6 and is set off at the beginning and the end by reference to the word "crown." I'm going to start with just the first 3 verses.

Ephraim's Folly Revealed (28:1-13)

Ephraim's Glory Fades While the Remnant Recognize the Lord is Their Glory (1-6)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>¹ Woe to the proud crown of the drunkards
of Ephraim,</p> <p>² Behold, the Lord has a strong and mighty <i>agent</i>;
Like a storm of mighty overflowing waters,</p> <p>³ Underfoot shall be trampled</p> | <p>And to the fading flower of its glorious beauty,
Which is at the head of the fertile valley of those who are overcome with wine!</p> <p>As a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction,
He has cast <i>it</i> down to the earth with <i>His</i> hand.</p> <p>The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim.</p> |
|---|--|

"Drunkards of Ephraim" wear a "proud crown." The word "crown" should probably translate here as "garland," such as worn by revelers at a party. Many wear the crown, not just one king. A garland of flowers and greenery would wilt soon after the party is over, or even during the party. So, when Isaiah writes woe "to the fading flower of its glorious beauty," the image of this quickly wilting party garlands suggests the transience of Ephraim's beauty; she is fading as a nation.

Samaria, the capital of Ephraim, sat on a hill at the end of a valley. And that may be the referent of the third verset. Isaiah writes, "Which is at the head of the fertile valley of those who are overcome with wine!" "Head of the valley" could have layered symbolism. "Head" could mean "the hill at one end." So, one end is the head of the valley, and on that hill is Samaria. Head could also refer to Samaria as the capital city, the head city, the head of Ephraim. But referring to Samaria as head is also a reference to the governing leaders of Ephraim in the same way saying Washington, or Moscow, or Beijing is the head, might not refer to the city but might refer to the people of influence who make up the government. You know, so that decision has been made by Moscow. It doesn't mean the city. It means the leaders in the city. This government is depicted as a group of drunk people at a party, and they are wearing garland crowns, and those crowns wilt before the night even ends.

Then, in verse 2 we shift our image to a coming invasion. “The Lord has a strong and mighty agent.” The Assyrian King Sargon II will overrun the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, sack the capital city Samaria, and send her inhabitants in exile. That’s during the first decade of Hezekiah’s reign as he reigns in southern Judah. Here, the army of Assyria is depicted, “as a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction.” Fierce rain will pour down and become a flood of overflowing water. Though this is a storm, not a river, but the effect is similar to the image in chapter 8 of the mighty Euphrates overflowing its banks to flood Israel. So, we have that image already in our mind. This language might also evoke Noah’s flood, when God cast down waters to cleanse the land.

The second verset of verse 2 may serve double duty.

Like a storm of mighty overflowing waters,	He has cast <i>it</i> down to the earth with <i>His</i> hand.
--	---

He has cast it down. But what has He cast down? The preceding versets makes it sound like he has cast down hail and rain. But the next verse makes it sound like he has cast down Ephraim’s crown.

³ Underfoot shall be trampled	The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim.
--	--

Ephraim is at an end. Verse 4 affirms that idea with a brief, but shocking image. 4a repeats the idea of a fading flower at the head of the valley, and that connects us to verse 1. The jolt comes with the abrupt switch of images in 4b. Try to imagine this.

⁴ And the fading flower of its glorious beauty, Will be like the first-ripe fig prior to summer,	Which is at the head of the fertile valley, Which one sees, <i>and</i> as soon as it is in his hand, He swallows it.
--	--

We are familiar with fading flowers as a picture of mankind’s transient reality. We are here today and gone tomorrow. I think the image of a ripe fig, picked and popped into the mouth is original to Isaiah. It is an everyday, mundane image. And yet, it creates such an image of how fleeting life is and how someone else can come and just end it. It is like the first fruit, it just begins to show, it has just become ripe this morning, it’s ready and the first passerby plucks it and swallows it, and it’s gone. Here this morning, gone in a moment. That’s how quickly Ephraim will have been and then be no more.

With Ephraim gone, the faithful ones turn their eyes to God alone. There is no false glory left to depend on. Verses 5 and 6.

⁵ In that day the LORD of hosts will become ⁶ A spirit of justice for him who sits in judgment,	a beautiful crown and a glorious diadem to the remnant of His people; A strength to those who repel the onslaught at the gate.
--	---

God and His kingdom last forever. He is the everlasting glory of those who love Him, “a beautiful crown and a glorious diadem to the remnant of his people.” This is the simple message that Israel forgot. No matter what you accomplish or what you have, remember always that it’s in the Lord God that you have glory. This is where your value is. It’s in God. Unless you start with Him, nothing else is going to matter. All your work and achievements depend on whether or not God is your foundation. With God at your center, you political leaders will find the wisdom you need to rule, and since Israel is here pictured as destroyed, we see that these verses are a message to Judah. They are still there. And you, leaders who are still there, in God you will find wisdom to rule “a spirit of justice for him who sits in judgment,” and the power you need to protect your city, “a strength to those who repel the onslaught at the gate.” That is, Judah, if you see Israel and take the message to heart.

Leader’s of the Nation Mock Isaiah’s Call to Faith (7-13)

So, you see how these first 6 verses of chapter 28 are marked off by the repeated reference to the beautiful crown, the fading, false crown versus the eternal, glorious crown who is Yahweh. In the next sub-section 7-13, the religious leaders of the nation mock Isaiah’s call to faith. They mock his words to them.

Commentators disagree on whether we have already shifted to Jerusalem or not. Is Isaiah describing a scene at the end of Ephraim or is this a scene in Judah? Motyer thinks these verses come out of Isaiah’s own experience. Isaiah is the one being made fun of. That could very well be. But no one knows with any

precision what the occasion actually was. Motyer suggests that we imagine the occasion to be the return of ambassadors from making treaty with Egypt. We will see the Egypt connection later. The leaders of the nation are full of themselves and full of strong drink. Isaiah rebukes them for trusting in fickle Egypt rather than trusting in God. They mock Isaiah for his simplistic faith.

That's a possible scenario. Oswalt, on the other hand, believes we are still imagining the leaders in Ephraim. He does not think it is a specific party where Isaiah was present. He does think it is a description of Israel based on the opposition Isaiah has experienced in his encounters with the cynical, religious leadership in Judah. And Isaiah knows he can apply that same attitude to Ephraim.

Deciding whether this image is meant to implicate leaders in Samaria or in Jerusalem may not really be crucial. The attitude expressed could easily apply to both. So, it's enough that we get a general idea of what is going on here. I'll read the whole and then go back through the text. This is Isaiah 28:7-13.

<p>⁷ And these also reel with wine The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they stagger from strong drink;</p>	<p>and stagger from strong drink: They are confused by wine, They reel while having visions, They totter <i>when rendering</i> judgment.</p>
<p>⁸ For all the tables are full of filthy vomit,</p>	<p>without a <i>single clean</i> place.</p>
<p>⁹ "To whom would He teach knowledge, Those <i>just</i> weaned from milk?</p>	<p>And to whom would He interpret the message? Those <i>just</i> taken from the breast?</p>
<p>¹⁰ "For <i>He says</i>, 'Order on order, order on order, A little here, a little there.' "</p>	<p>Line on line, line on line,</p>
<p>¹¹ Indeed, through stammering lips and a foreign tongue,</p>	<p>He will speak to this people</p>
<p>¹² He who said to them, "Here is rest, give rest to the weary,"</p>	<p>And, "Here is repose," but they would not listen.</p>
<p>¹³ So the word of the LORD to them will be, "Order on order, order on order, A little here, a little there,"</p>	<p>Line on line, line on line,</p>
<p>That they may go and stumble backward,</p>	<p>be broken, snared and taken captive.</p>

Verse 7 begins with a poetic use of repetition that mimics drunkards at a party. So, you have to imagine a person in the movement that you get from this repetition.

<p>⁷And these also reel with wine The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they stagger from strong drink;</p>	<p>and stagger from strong drink: They are confused by wine, They reel while having visions, They totter <i>when rendering</i> judgment.</p>
---	--

They stagger, they reel, they stagger, they reel, they totter like a drunkard. We're surprised when Isaiah identifies the party goers as priest and prophet. We expect seriousness, and decorum, and moral uprightness from this class of leader. Isaiah does not describe this as a religious event. There is no reference to Temple, or to altar, or to incense stand. Priest and prophet celebrate together with the other elites of power. But they don't look any different than anyone else. In fact, Isaiah has given us this idea that when they have visions and when they render judgment, it's like a drunk person. That is how much you should trust them. They are confused by wine. Don't listen to what they say. Verse 8 adds a realistic bit of detail to help us imagine how far gone this party is.

<p>⁸ For all the tables are full of filthy vomit,</p>	<p>without a <i>single clean</i> place.</p>
--	---

Yuck! It's not a party I want to be at. The tables, certainly decorated nicely at the beginning of the night, are now full of filthy vomit. This is a party way past the social drinking stage. The vomit is not from one person. There is not a single clean place. So they are all in this together. That is Isaiah's description of the leadership of Judah. And with that picture as the backdrop, counselors in that

government, mock Isaiah's words. They belittle his message as having no place in halls of power but fit only for the nursery room. That's verse 9,

⁹ "To whom would He teach knowledge, And to whom would He interpret the message?
Those *just* weaned from milk? Those *just* taken from the breast?"

Now Isaiah's words sound like something you should go teach little children. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." In reality, that little song, you could just live that way. There is so much power in the simple. The actual Hebrew of what they say is something like, "Saw lay saw, saw lay saw. Qaw lay qaw, qaw lay qaw." Interpreters are not sure whether there is supposed to be any meaning to that. The second phrase, "qaw lay qaw," can be interpreted, "line on line." The first phrase, "saw on saw," may literally be, "do on do." And if it is intended to convey meaning, one option is that it means "do things in an orderly fashion." Isaiah's words aren't complex and twisted. They are simple and orderly. The word "line" will be connected later with the cornerstone in verse 17, "I will make justice the measuring line." So, line on line. Maybe we are supposed to get a meaning here. But even with that connection, maybe this mocking is supposed to be without meaning. Some translators have think these phrases should simply be taken as someone speaking without meaning, like, "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Or they should be the talk of an infant, "ba, ba, ba, ba, da, da, da, da." Whether Isaiah's original audience would have heard a specific meaning in the words or not, we still get the gist. Prophet and priest are making fun of Isaiah's simplicity.

¹⁰ "For *He* says, 'Order on order, order on order, Line on line, line on line,
A little here, a little there.' "

That's a bit ironic considering how much elegance and complexity we have already encountered in Isaiah's poetic prophecy. We have seen the intricacy of his structure, the power of his imagery, the skill with which he uses language. But it is not the poetry they are making fun of. It is Isaiah's exhortation to begin everything with God. He told Ahaz and the people of Judah under his rule, "Do not make alliance with Assyria." He exhorted in our earlier chapters, "Put your faith in God. God must be central. Trust His Word. To the Word, to the testimony. Express your faith by holy life and by caring for orphan and widow. That's what you need to be focused on." He is telling the leaders of Hezekiah's court the same thing, "Do not make alliance with Egypt. Put your faith in God. God must be central. Trust His Word. Be holy. Care for the poor and oppressed." Isaiah's message, no matter how beautifully it's packaged, sounds simplistic to these worldly religious leaders.

Indeed, there is a simplicity to it. There is also depth. But you cannot get to the depth of true relationship with God if you do not start with the simple beginning of trusting God and His Word as central to everything you do. Trust God. Really trust God. You have to start there. But these experienced leaders deal in realpolitik. They deal in covenants and then back-room treaties behind the covenants, and you're playing this guy up against that guy, and it's complex and it's deceptive. Faith-based answers and morality-based principles are good to keep the masses happy. It's good for your kids, it's good for your basic Jewish family. Live right, do good – that's good for them but it has no serious place in the policies of politics and government. And the counselors, who are supposed to contribute spiritually and ethically to the discussion; they are there in the room, the priest and prophet, they have given themselves over with the rest to cynical pragmatism.

Oswalt comments, "There is no more hardened nor cynical person in the world than a religious leader who has seared his conscience. For them, tender appeals which would move anyone else become sources of amusement. They have learned how to debunk everything and to believe nothing (Heb. 10:26–31), all the while speaking loftily of matters of the spirit (Jas. 3:13–18)."²⁴

And so, because the leaders of Israel and Judah will not be taught by the Word of God, they must be taught by the hard reality of life. Isaiah turns their critique around against them. "You make fun of my speech, saying you cannot understand my childish words. Very soon you will be ruled by a people

²⁴ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 1-39*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 509.

whose words you do not understand. God has offered you rest. You have rejected it. And so, you will be defeated, and you will be taken captive by foreigners whose speech means nothing to you.” That’s the meaning of 11-13.

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 11 | Indeed, through stammering lips and
a foreign tongue, | He will speak to this people |
| 12 | He who said to them, “Here is rest, give rest
to the weary,” | And, “Here is repose,” but they would not listen. |
| 13 | So the word of the LORD to them will be,
“Order on order, order on order,
A little here, a little there,” | Line on line, line on line,
be broken, snared and taken captive. |
| | That they may go and stumble backward, | |

This woe began with a judgment of doom on Ephraim that emphasized the ephemeral nature of human glory and society. Hope for humanity is found in the revelation of God’s will. But in the second sub-section of the woe, the spiritual counselors of the nation, men positioned to hear and communicate God’s word show themselves to be cynical politicians who mock God’s prophet. They deal in complex tribe strategies. They live at the level of CEO’s, and presidents, and congressmen. They don’t have time for the revealed Word of God. This is real life. We don’t have time for that.

The second half of the woe has clearly moved us to Judah. Ephraim’s folly has been revealed. Judah’s leaders are now exhorted to not make the same mistake. We will see in the first sub-section that Judah has already followed Israel in folly, making for themselves a covenant of death. In the second sub-section Isaiah will call them to trust the wisdom of God.

Hear the Word of the Lord Leaders of Jerusalem (28:14-29)

Judah’s Covenant of Death Will Lead to Destruction (14-22)

Judah’s destructive covenant of death is decried in verses 14-22. We begin with just the first 2 verses. This is Isaiah 28:14-15.

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 14 | Therefore, hear the word of the LORD,
Who rule this people | O scoffers,
who are in Jerusalem, |
| 15 | Because you have said, “We have made a
covenant with death,
The overwhelming scourge will not reach us
when it passes by, | And with Sheol we have made a pact.

For we have made falsehood our refuge and we
have concealed ourselves with deception.” |

Whether the men taunting Isaiah earlier in verse 9 and 10 should be understood as men from Israel or Judah, that attitude is here applied to those who rule Jerusalem. Isaiah calls them scoffers. Then Isaiah puts words into their mouths. “You say I speak as to infants. I say you have heartily embraced a covenant of death.” This is not some occult practice that they are engaging in. These leaders are excited about the covenant they have made. They think their skilled diplomacy has won security. So, they are going to come back, “We made this covenant of life with Egypt!” But Isaiah puts words in their mouth. He argues, “No, no, no, no! The covenant with Egypt, against the will of God – you are bragging about the covenant of death. We have brought death to Judah! That’s what you’re really saying.”

I don’t know if Isaiah’s contemporary audience was supposed to know immediately here in chapter 28 that this treaty he was talking about was the one made with Egypt, or whether the prophet was building up to a later reveal. Egypt is not going to be named until chapter 30 and then we are all going to know it’s Egypt. I know that we as readers, we are far enough removed from the situation that you can’t pick up from the context that we are talking about Egypt, but it’s going to be made explicit. That is what has happened. Judah’s leaders have sought safety from Assyria in an alliance with Pharaoh.

The first verset of 15b accurately communicates the thoughts of Judah's leaders. They think that "The overwhelming scourge will not reach us when it passes by." But then again Isaiah puts into their mouths the reality of what they have done, though they don't admit it to themselves, this is really the outcome of what they're saying, "For we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception."

Isaiah has taken the words of the politicians and reinterpreted them according to what they have really done and what their real outcome is. "When you tell us you made a covenant with Egypt, you claim security. But I tell you, when you announce your covenant with Egypt, the reality of your action is a rejection of God, resulting in a covenant with death." Egypt will not protect you. You are deceiving yourself and you are deceiving the people.

Isaiah then declares the word of God to the leaders of Judah.

¹⁶ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a tested stone,

A costly cornerstone *for* the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes *in it* will not be disturbed.

I know you recognize that passage. Both Peter and Paul quote this verse in reference to Jesus. Paul in Romans 9:33 and Peter in 1 Peter 2:6. The immediate context does not identify the cornerstone with the Davidic Messiah. Peter and Paul may have connected Isaiah's cornerstone to Jesus with encouragement from Psalm 118:22 and 26, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone...Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." You know, that was the phrase was shouted by the crowd during Jesus' triumphal entry before His crucifixion (John 12:13). Verse 26 in Psalm 118 is clearly the coming Messiah and Jesus embraced that identity. But in the Psalm, He is also the chief cornerstone. Isaiah may have made that link himself in Psalm 118.

Peter and Paul could have also made the connection here in Isaiah without Psalm 118 just from the broader context. The Hebrew for "laying the stone" could either be rendered, "I am laying a stone in Zion," or, "I am laying a stone, Zion." The first emphasizes a stone to be laid in Zion, so that can be someone else being laid inside of Zion. The other sees the stone as Zion. And the imagery of Zion and the Davidic ruler are intertwined so much in Isaiah's vision of God's Kingdom that it is not easy to discern which is in view here. One seems to assume the other. The language here seems to lean towards the stone as the cornerstone of a new foundation for the new city. But the language in verse 17 of justice and righteousness points to the God's character, which we expect to see exemplified in the Messiah. It is the language both from the declaration of a son who will be born in chapter 9 – his government will be just and righteous - and the root of Jesse in chapter 11. So even if the immediate context makes it sound like this stone is the cornerstone of the foundation of a new city, that cornerstone can still be the Messiah. He is the foundation. It is through the Messiah that the right and true foundation of the new city is to be laid. And then there is the word "testing" in this verse. That can be taken two ways.

The firm foundation will be laid with a cornerstone that is either a tested stone, which says something about the stone; or a stone of testing, which says something about the stone's purpose. Both ideas are true in regard to Jesus. He was tested by Satan in the wilderness. He was tested again in the Garden of Gethsemane. And He was tested by His death and shown to be true through the power of the Holy Spirit in His resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4). Jesus is a tested stone. He is the way, He is the truth, He is the life. He is the cornerstone to any real foundation of life. Jesus also proves to be a stone of testing. Will you believe in Him? Or will you stumble over Him?

Here, Isaiah challenges the leaders of Jerusalem to trust in the stone that God lays. Security is found when God is the rock, when He is the foundation. Jesus made that point when He urged His listeners to build their house on the rock of God's Word and not on sand. The covenant with Egypt is a foundation of sand.

The final verset ends with the word “disturbed”, “He who believes in it will not be disturbed.” That word is used twenty times by Isaiah, “always with the sense of ‘hurrying.’”²⁵ So, he who believes in it will not be hurrying around. We can imagine the serious men and women in the halls of power scurrying here and there to make diplomatic deals that will ensure Judah’s security. And its not too hard to turn that on ourselves and imagine our own rushing about, hither and yon, sometimes at a frantic pace, working to ensure our own safety and the security of our family. This is Isaiah’s simple message, so difficult to truly accept and apply in day-to-day life, “Remember that God is your salvation, even though the building is not complete, even though you look ahead to a city of peace as of yet, still unrealized, trust in God. God is building His Kingdom on Jesus Christ, who is the true cornerstone. Whatever challenges you face in modern society, you can experience peace and security through faith in Him, if Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of your foundation, if you are resting yourselves on Him. Then you don’t have to scurry about hither and tither and be disturbed. You can rest in security in Christ.”

About Judah, Robert Alter comments, “In place of a city ruled by drunken idiots, God will establish a just, firm-founded city, while those who made a covenant with death will be swept away (verses 17–21).²⁶ That idea of being swept away is communicated in verses 17-22. Rain and hail were mentioned earlier on in this woe, where verse 2 imagined a storm that would come on Ephraim. Isaiah’s use of the word “hail” here connects Israel and Judah together in divine judgment.

<p>17 “I will make justice the measuring line Then hail will sweep away the refuge of lies</p> <p>18 “Your covenant with death will be canceled, When the overwhelming scourge passes through,</p> <p>19 “As often as it passes through, it will seize you;</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">And to understand what it means.</p> <p>20 The bed is too short on which to stretch out, 21 For the LORD will rise up as <i>at</i> Mount Perazim, To do His task, His unusual task, 22 And now do not carry on as scoffers, For of decisive destruction I have heard</p>	<p>And righteousness the level; And the waters will overflow the secret place. And your pact with Sheol will not stand; Then you become its trampling <i>place</i>. For morning after morning it will pass through, <i>anytime</i> during the day or night, will be sheer terror”</p> <p>And the blanket is too small to wrap oneself in. He will be stirred up as in the valley of Gibeon, And to work His work, His extraordinary work. Or your fetters will be made stronger; from the Lord GOD of hosts</p>
--	---

on all the earth.

The mention in verse 21 to Mount Perazim and the valley of Gibeon refers to two battles David fought against the Philistines. David describes the victory God gave him saying, “The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters (2 Samuel 5:20).” The water of God’s wrath broke through David’s enemies. But here, the water of that wrath is going to break through Judah. Build on the rock, or the storm will wash you away.

Isaiah Calls for Trust in the Wisdom of God (23-29)

Isaiah concludes the first “woe” in 23-29 with a call to trust in God’s wisdom. He gives us two related images. The first describes wise sowing of the farmer. The second describes wise reaping of the farmer. The wise farmer sows in verses 23-26.

<p>23 Give ear and hear my voice, 24 Does the farmer plow continually to plant seed? 25 Does he not level its surface And plant wheat in rows, 26 For his God instructs</p>	<p>Listen and hear my words. Does he <i>continually</i> turn and harrow the ground? And sow dill and scatter cumin Barley in its place and rye within its area? and teaches him properly.</p>
---	---

²⁵ Motyer, 233.

²⁶ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1830.

What point is Isaiah making? It's not precisely clear. Here are two options. First, the point could have to do with God's work of judgment about to come on Judah. The farmer must treat the earth violently. He turns it. Listen to the verbs. He turns it, plows it, levels its surface. Turning up the land allows the farmer to plant new seeds that will bear fruit. If God has taught this to the farmer, then we should not be surprised when God does the same to Judah, violently turning up the land to plant living seed that will produce true fruit.

Or the point could have to do with the faith of Judah's leaders. If God has taught these natural principles to farmers so that they might sow with a view towards harvest, should not Judah's leaders look to God for the wisdom they need to lead the nation and bring about a good harvest? As God instructs the farmer, God will also instruct the prophet, the priest, and the politician. But they must start with trust in God and His Word.

There are two options you can think about. Which of those is this image describing? Is it God's work of sowing? Or is it the leader trusting the wisdom of God so that they might sow well? Whichever point Isaiah has just made, it looks like he is pretty much restating that point with the image of reaping in verses 27-29.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>²⁷ For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,
But dill is beaten out with a rod,</p> <p>²⁸ <i>Grain for</i> bread is crushed,
Because the wheel of <i>his</i> cart and his horses
<i>eventually damage it,</i></p> <p>²⁹ This also comes from the LORD of hosts,</p> | <p>Nor is the cartwheel driven over cumin;
and cumin with a club.</p> <p>Indeed, he does not continue to thresh it forever.
He does not thresh it longer.</p> <p><i>Who</i> has made <i>His</i> counsel wonderful
and <i>His</i> wisdom great.</p> |
|---|--|

Again, the violence done to the dill and cumin in the process of reaping could point to the result of God's judgment. The faithful must trust that God is at work, reaping the harvest He has planted, and He will use just as much pain and suffering or violence as necessary. And the different methods employed for different crops may suggest that God will act differently with Judah than He did with Israel. His wisdom is great. He will bring about a righteous end, even though the process may require pain.

Or we may wonder whether a challenge to the leadership of Judah is again in mind. The farmer knows how to go about the business of reaping a harvest. He knows how to treat different grains differently. His wisdom comes from God. The wisdom to lead a people also comes from God. As the text says, "God's counsel is wonderful and his wisdom great." Trust in the Lord.

Whether the two images describe the wise work of God who, like a farmer, knows how to bring about a fruitful harvest, or the two images call leaders to act wisely, trusting God to teach the politician as He teaches the farmer, either way Isaiah exhorts the leaders of Judah to depend on the wisdom of God as He carries out his sovereign plan. Trust in God.

That message applies equally to leaders of the nation state and to everyday believers. In whatever we do, trust that God has a plan. And that God, in His wisdom will bring about that plan. We may be at the stage of the turning of the soil. We may be in the stage of threshing out the grain. God is working for the good of you who love Him, even if the stage you are in right now is painful and you don't yet see the fruit.

The word of God is your foundation. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. You may need to do some hurrying around to get all your chores and responsibilities done, but in the hurry-burry of life, don't become frantic. This simple message still applies, "God is your Rock. He is your security. He is your rest. He is your future. Trust God."

Lesson 14 Isaiah 29 Historical Deliverance and Spiritual Transformation

Introduction

Isaiah <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>						
Book of the King 1-39						
The Lord of History 28-37						
Six Woes 28-35						The Rock of History 36-37
The One Foundation 28:1-29	A Problem Solved, a Problem Stated 29:1-14	Spiritual Transformation 29:15-24	Human Faithfulness and God's Faithfulness 30:1-33	Deliverance and Renewal 31:1-32:20	Victory, Proclamation and Pilgrimage 33:1-35:10	1 st Assyrian Embassy 2 nd Assyrian Embassy Finale: Assyrian Defeat

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

God has declared His purposes to us in His Word through His prophets. Some of those purposes have already been fulfilled, some we are experiencing, and some are for the future. The purposes fulfilled are our past heritage. We look back to Adam and Eve, to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to David. We look back every time we take the Lord's supper to that most important of all fulfilled promises: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We look back to Pentecost, to the birth of the Church, and to the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the Earth through history down to our days. That is past.

God's present work is where we find ourselves participating in the story. This is our time. This is our moment to see God at work in us, in our local church, in our society, in the global Christian community. This is the present. Many of God's purposes are not yet fulfilled. Jesus Christ does reign in Heaven. But spiritual and human powers of evil have not yet been abolished on Earth. Jesus has not yet come back. We still groan, longing for the glorification of our bodies, longing for our new home. The new Heavens and new Earth are still our future hope.

Experiencing God's Word come true in the present strengthens us in our faith as we hope in the fulfillment of God's future promises, and to trust that those promises will be fulfilled at the right time according to His sovereign plan. Isaiah points out that truth to the people of Israel in chapters 28-37. He reminds them of God's deliverance from the Assyrians who had surrounded Jerusalem. This was part of their present. He exhorts them to remember how they struggled to trust God for that deliverance, and to remember how God kept His word in spite of their weakness: the word He had communicated through Isaiah. This large section makes the point, just as God fulfilled His word in our present circumstances, you better believe that He will bring about the future that he has described in the previous section. The *Universal Kingdom*, chapters 13-27, gave to Judah all kinds of promises that were yet to be fulfilled. It's all in the future.

That future vision of the mighty empire Assyria coming to an end and the great city Babylon becoming a deserted wasteland, and that further future vision of the city of man being overthrown and the city of God being established on Earth where God's glory will shine brighter than the sun, and where the super-power oppressors of God's people will come to share in the inheritance of Israel, all of those far off realities will be realized. And yet, the people hearing this prophecy could ask, "How do we know, Isaiah? How do we trust your vision of these future events?" Well, what if Isaiah were to tell you that Assyria would surround Jerusalem, only to be stricken down by the hand of God? If you saw that, would you believe? Or what if I were to tell you that Assyria as an empire is only going to last another 70 or 80 years tops, if you saw that happen in your lifetime, would you be prepared to believe the word given to you for the future?

Let me give you an example. This is from more recent history, in the past 100 years or so. In the early twentieth century, not a lot of Christians believed that any predictions concerning Israel were meant to be interpreted literally. They read that in their Bible, and they think there must be a symbolic or spiritual meaning, or this must be about the Church. I can't be about Israel the people or Israel the

nation. Because there was no Israel. There was only a small Jewish presence in the Promised Land. Jews had not ruled in Jerusalem since the Roman destruction of the city and the Temple in 70 AD.

In fact, this was not the first time Jerusalem, and her Temple were destroyed, and the people removed from the land. The first time happened in 600 BC with the conquest of Babylon. About 70 years later, the Jews were back, the Temple and the walls were rebuilt. And that was incredible. Who has ever heard of a people being totally removed from their land, and then coming back and re-establishing themselves? But it was only 70 years, so it's happened and maybe it was in the realm of possibility.

But this second exile, the Jews being gone again, has lasted so much longer, almost 2000 years. Romans ruled, and Muslims ruled, and then a brief period of Crusaders, and then back Muslim and the Ottoman Empire, up until World War I when the British finally took over. There is no Jewish government. There is no Israel.

In the modern era, nobody thought Israel would ever exist again. So, Christian theologians just assumed that it was going to be fulfillment through the Church, or that it's all metaphoric, it's symbolic.

Well, then the unthinkable happened. The Jews came back. A nation state was formed in ancient lands. The Hebrew language was resurrected. There were not just Jews living in the land, but a government, an actual geopolitical Israel. And so, we can ask those same theologians, "Now what do you think about the possibility that some of those end time prophecies apply literally to the people of Israel and the city Jerusalem?" Well, a lot of Christian theologians, since 1948 have started to say, "You know what, maybe some of these things are meant to be taken literally."

I am not going to make a case right now for anything in particular. We still have to do careful Bible study, as we see through studying Isaiah. Some things are meant to be literal, and some things are meant to be metaphorical. And we address the literature, whichever genre we are looking at, with skill and with wisdom, and we faithfully handle the Bible. But we certainly don't discount literal fulfillment. Think about all the prophecies of Jesus hundreds of years before His appearance. The Messiah really did come as a man. He really was pierced. He really was betrayed. He really was sold for gold. He really was born in Bethlehem, and He really did grow up in Nazareth. The prophecies literally came true.

Remembering some of the amazing things that God has done in history helps strengthen our faith in His word, particularly when that word applies to major political events, or even unthinkable events. However likely or impossible something sounds, it's not impossible for God. God's word is true. Build your house on this rock.

Isaiah challenged Hezekiah and his fellow countrymen to trust God and His word as they set policy for the nation. Israel and Judah were caught in the middle of two major superpowers as Egypt in the south and Assyria in the north fought over the territory in-between, which included Israel and Judah.

By the time the book of Isaiah was written, this story in chapters 28-37 has already happened. Hezekiah has already faced the invading Assyrian army. The story is a reminder. Remember what happened in our present, in our own day. We were afraid. We made bad decisions. But then Hezekiah trusted God. And good thing he did, because we saw Yahweh to truly be the Lord of History, the Lord over the nations, the Lord who acts when He is ready to act.

And if what God said about Assyria was true, you better believe that what He says about Babylon later will also come true. And if what he says about Babylon later comes true, you better believe that what He says about future events will come true. The coming of the Messiah who will die, that's going to come true. And even further than that: the coming of the Messiah who is going to reign and establish a new Heaven and new Earth, that is going to come true. Even if Israel were to be wiped off the map completely, God is able to bring them back. He is the Lord of History. Take strength in the unbreakableness of His Word.

That's the section we have entered into now, last week with chapter 28. God is the Lord of History. Isaiah is going to remind us of that by retelling the story of Hezekiah and his government as they try to make policy for the nation.

The whole section of chapters 28-37 is organized as six woes and a conclusion. We considered the first woe in our last lesson. We will consider the next two woes in this lesson. Motyer sees in the six woes a kind of parallel pattern, where the first three woes present principles, and the second three woes show those principles at work in the events leading up to the surrounding of Jerusalem by Assyria.

We will consider the 2nd and 3rd woe in this lesson. Both are in chapter 29. We will also consider the principle that Motyer sees suggested by each woe.

Chapter 28 gave us the 1st woe and the 1st of Motyer's principles. Each principle follows the structure of the woe. Here is Motyer's principle from the 1st woe.

"When God's people reject His Word" (remember how priest and prophet mocked Isaiah's call to faith as fit only for the nursery, that was in 28:9-13) "When God's people reject His Word and covenant" (remember, they called it, "the covenant of death"), "destruction follows" (remember the hail storm) "held within divine purposes" (remember the examples of a sowing and reaping; the farmer does violence to the Earth to bring about a crop in 28:23-29). Let me say that again without interjecting.

Here's that principle: the principle of the first woe, "When God's people reject His Word (28:9-13) and covenant (28:14-15), destruction follows (28:18-22), held within divine purposes (28:23-29)."²⁷

That's the 1st one. We will get to the 2nd and 3rd principles after we consider the text of each woe. So, here we go. The 2nd woe.

2nd Woe (29:1-14)

The 2nd woe begins with this verse.

¹Woe, O Ariel, Ariel the city *where* David *once* camped!

Ariel is identified in that second verset as the city of David. But why Ariel? Jerusalem has many names, but up to this point in history Ariel has not been one of those names. All the Bibles I have, English and Croatian, simply transliterate the Hebrew as "Ariel." But what does it mean? Does Ariel have a meaning?

There are two main options. "Ari" is the Hebrew word used in Genesis 49:9 as part of the prophecy describing the tribe of Judah, David's tribe. There "ari" is "lion." "El" means, "God." So, "ariel" means "lion of God." Robert Altar prefers this meaning.

The second option recognizes that the word here is spelled the same as the word used in Ezekiel 43:15 for "altar hearth," or literally, "hearth of el." The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew lexicon defines this word as, "the top, mostly flat, fire-holding area of an altar." Motyer and Oswalt both prefer this meaning.

I lean towards the "altar hearth" translation because of a point Oswalt makes. The concept "Lion of God" does not seem to have any relationship to the rest of the text, but "altar hearth" does. We are going to be talking about traditional, outward religion through chapter 29, so the idea of the altar hearth connects to the mention of feasts in verse 1, to consuming fire in verse 6, and to religious lip service in verse 13.

The full 2nd woe occurs in 29:1-14. It can be divided into four sub-sections, disaster and deliverance, then blindness and illumination. Our principle from the 1st woe recognized that, even though God's judgment brings destruction, that destruction is part of a wider plan for God's people.

²⁷ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 228.

This woe indicates that part of God’s plan after judgment is transformation. We begin, though, with disaster. Isaiah 29:1-4.

Disaster (1-4)

- | | |
|---|--|
| ¹ Woe, O Ariel, Ariel
Add year to year, | the city <i>where</i> David <i>once</i> camped!
observe <i>your</i> feasts on schedule. |
| ² I will bring distress to Ariel, | And she will be <i>a city of</i> lamenting and mourning; |
| | And she will be like an Ariel to me. |
| ³ I will camp against you encircling <i>you</i> , | And I will set siegeworks against you, |
| | And I will raise up battle towers against you. |
| ⁴ Then you will be brought low; | From the earth you will speak, and from the dust |
| | <i>where</i> you are prostrate your words <i>will come</i> |
| Your voice will also be like that of a spirit
from the ground, | And your speech will whisper from the dust. |

The altar hearth is the place a sacrifice is consumed by fire. Ariel is not the sacrifice. Ariel is the place of sacrifice, the place of judgment and atonement. True worship is offered humbly at the altar. False worship goes through the motions of humility, observing feasts on schedule year after year. But lacking sincere humility, the people of Judah will experience humiliation in defeat. That’s the language here.

The people of Jerusalem will be brought low. They will lie in the dust. They are not dead. They are humiliated. “From the dust where you are prostrate your words will come...and your speech will whisper from the dust.”

From this point of humiliation, God will bring about deliverance. That’s in verses 5-8.

Deliverance (5-8)

- | | |
|--|---|
| ⁵ But the multitude of your enemies
will become like fine dust, | And the multitude of the ruthless ones like the
chaff which blows away; |
| | And it will happen instantly, suddenly. |
| ⁶ From the LORD of hosts you will be punished
<i>With</i> whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a consuming fire. | with thunder and earthquake and loud noise, |
| ⁷ And it will be like a dream, a vision of the night- | And the multitude of all the nations who wage
war against Ariel, |
| Even all who wage war against her and
her stronghold, | and who distress her, |
| ⁸ It will be as when a hungry man dreams—
and behold, he is eating; | But when he awakens, his hunger is not satisfied, |
| Or as when a thirsty man dreams—
and behold, he is drinking, | But when he awakens, behold, he is faint
and his thirst is not quenched. |
| Thus the multitude of all the nations will be | Who wage war against Mount Zion. |

A great reversal happens between the people of Jerusalem and their enemies. First, the enemies are successful. The citizens of Ariel were pictured face-down in the dust, now their enemies become like fine dust. It is more than a reversal. Their enemies are not now prostrate. This is like Marvel’s *Infinity War*. The enemy becomes fine dust and like chaff blows away. “And it will happen instantly, suddenly.”

This prophecy brings to mind the actual events of chapters 36 and 37. The army of Assyria marches in to Judah, surrounds Jerusalem, and taunts the defenders. The men of Judah hide in fear behind Jerusalem’s walls. They are humiliated. But in an instance, the army of Assyria is gone.

The Assyrians had full assurance of victory over Jerusalem. They looked at their numbers, their siege engines, their strength and ability and they knew that Jerusalem must fall. But their assurance turned out to be like a dream in the night. That’s what we’ve read in verse 8.

<p>⁸ It will be as when a hungry man dreams— and behold, he is eating; Or as when a thirsty man dreams— and behold, he is drinking,</p>	<p>But when he awakens, his hunger is not satisfied, But when he awakens, behold, he is faint and his thirst is not quenched.</p>
--	--

They are so sure of their victory, it's like they're eating, and they are on their way to being satisfied, to awaken and to see that their work is empty.

God's wrath has two possible results, humiliation or death. God's wrath is always just. The wages of sin is death. God never executes wrath on an innocent human being. There are none. Still, God is extremely patient with those who love Him. But to those who rebel and turn to a covenant of death, God will eventually exact just punishment. That punishment may be final, the demand for life of the one punished, no hope of redemption. Or that punishment may be conditional, allowing for repentance. God may drop us into a pit so deep that we must give up the illusion of being able to save ourselves and finally, in humility from the dust, cry out to Him for salvation.

In this section, Judah as a whole community was humiliated. They became prostrate, clearly unable to save themselves. But then God did save. Their enemies experienced a worse punishment of near annihilation. Judah is given a chance to cry out to God.

The religious culture of the city had not produced a brokenness of heart. There was not true humility and worship. There was rebellion against God. So God made the whole city an altar of sacrifice upon which He sacrificed both the pride of Jerusalem and the pride of Assyria, so that some would repent, some would believe.

Hezekiah will exemplify humiliation that leads to faith. But that does not mean everyone who suffers and is given a second chance, turns to God in faith. We easily make promises during crises. Most of us have, at least metaphorically, found ourselves on a life raft in the middle of an ocean and promised, "God, save me, and I will live for you. Just do this one thing for me, God!" And how quickly the will to fulfill that promise dissipates after the crisis passes! Mostly we just return to the way things were. Rescue from physical trial and suffering does not guarantee spiritual transformation.

The second half of this woe shifts from the external disaster and deliverance to internal blindness and a promise of eventual illumination. The description of blindness is in 9-12.

Blindness (9-12)

<p>⁹ Be delayed and wait, They become drunk, but not with wine, they stagger, but not with strong drink. He has shut your eyes, the prophets;</p>	<p>Blind yourselves and be blind; ¹⁰ For the LORD has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, And He has covered your heads, the seers.</p>
--	--

¹¹ The entire vision will be to you like the words of a sealed book, which when they give it to the one who is literate, saying, "Please read this," he will say, "I cannot, for it is sealed." ¹² Then the book will be given to the one who is illiterate, saying, "Please read this." And he will say, "I cannot read."

These verses begin with the imperative, "Be delayed and wait. Blind yourselves and be blind." Now, the idea of waiting is often synonymous with faith in the prophets. "Wait on the Lord." But here, combined with the verb "be delayed" or "be stunned", the sense is one of indecision. They do not know what to do because they are blind. That blindness was at first self-inflicted, a refusal to see reality according to God's Word. The punishment for refusing to see is actual blindness. Mom used to say, "Don't make a face like that, it may freeze that way." Well, if we squinch up our eyes up refusing to recognize, to see God's light, God's will, He may grant that request, such that when we open our eyes eventually, they don't work anymore. We find that we are blind to moral and spiritual truth. Our conscience has been seared. We don't have sensitivity anymore to the things of God.

That's what has happened to Judah. It's the language used in the call of Isaiah, way back in chapter 6 when God explained to Isaiah his particular mission, "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, their eyes dim." Isaiah's mission was to preach the word as God revealed it and, in so doing, contribute to the blindness of a people intent on turning their eyes away from God's truth. And Isaiah described that reality in the previous chapter when priests and prophets mocked his prophetic words. It's like the Word of God, that's for children, Isaiah. They refused to see the truth in it.

And there, just like here, they are described as staggering like drunkards. In 28:7 Isaiah wrote, "They are confused by wine, they stagger from strong drink; they reel while having visions, they totter when rendering judgment." Drunkenness is a picture of their spiritual state. They are confused in their visions and judgments.

There are two words there in 28:7 that may help us understand here the connection between verses 29:10 and 29:11. The two words are "visions" and "judgment." The seer sees visions. The prophet delivers judgments. Here, Isaiah tells us the prophets' eyes have been shut and the seers' heads covered, maybe like with a cloth over their head so they cannot see. This is not a punishment on good, insightful prophets and seers who are trying to understand what is going on according to God's revelation. They are the religious leaders who mocked Isaiah's commitment to revealed truth. Isaiah speaks like a child. They see better. They see practically and realistically. They understand the world of politics and pragmatism. Faith doesn't work here. They squeezed their eyes shut so as not to see, and upon opening their eyes they find they cannot see even if they wanted to.

The revelation of truth from Isaiah is like a book sealed. And that focus on the prophet, whose job is to know Torah and apply God's law practically to the people of their generation. But the word is kept from them. This interpretation and explanation of the word for this generation is sealed. They can make no clear judgment. The seer sees the truth like in a dream or a vision, but is illiterate. They can't read the vision, the words they see. They are confused, unable to interpret it. They have nothing to offer in crisis.

And so, God's people are going to need more than deliverance from Assyria. If they are blind, saving them physically doesn't save them spiritually. They are still going to need a transformation of the heart. Even if God does vanquish the attacking army, they need to see with spiritual eyes. Verses 13-14 state the need and that God intends to meet the need.

Illumination (13-14)

¹³ Then the Lord said,

"Because this people draw near with their words And honor Me with their lip service,
 But they remove their hearts far from Me,
 And their reverence for Me consists of tradition

learned by rote,

¹⁴ Therefore behold, I will once again

deal marvelously with this people, wondrously
 marvelous;
 And the wisdom of their wise men will perish, And the discernment of their discerning men
 will be concealed."

This verse 13 is a conviction of every generation that has grown up in a church. We have to ask, "Is this true of me?"

¹³ Then the Lord said,

"Because this people draw near with their words (that's easy to do) And honor Me with their
 lip service,

But they remove their hearts far from Me, (is my heart in line, do I have integrity of worship where
 what I'm doing outside of me is in line with what's inside of me?)

And their reverence for Me consists of tradition

learned by rote,

They have memorized when to stand, when to sit, how to kneel, what the songs are, how to hold up their hands at the right time. They know how to look spiritual. They know how to seem to be praising Me. Are they? Commitment to ritual is not the same thing as heart commitment to relationship with God. They have the appearance of reverence, but it's not true reverence. They have the appearance of worship, but it's not true worship. God is not honored by people going through the motions. He is honored by a transformed heart that loves Him and loves people.

Here God says He will do something marvelous. "The wisdom of their wise men will perish," that is the religious scoffers who seem so wise. They are going to be shown to be foolishness. Their discerning men were not really discerning after all. And God is going to put an end to this false wisdom. God will bring about a transformation that reveals the falseness of cultural religion.

That's the 2nd woe. Let's remind ourselves of the principle of the 1st woe and then consider the principle suggested here by the text of this 2nd woe.

Motyer's first principle was this.

- (1) When God's people reject His word (9–13) and covenant (14–15), destruction follows (18–22), held within divine purposes (23–29)

Now we can add a second principle from this 2nd woe.

- (2) There is disaster and deliverance (that was verses 1–8) but historical deliverance does not change people spiritually. This needs a further divine action (verses 9–14), which is already planned.

Our 3rd woe assures us that, in spite of human resistance to God's planned good for His people, God will bring transformation to pass.

3rd woe (29:15-24)

This woe has three parts, the problem; the promise; and the fulfillment. The problem is stated in 15-16.

The problem (15-16)

- | | |
|--|--|
| ¹⁵ Woe to those who deeply burrow from
the LORD,
And whose deeds are <i>done</i> in a dark place, | to hide their plans

And they say, "Who sees us?" or "Who
knows us?" |
| ¹⁶ You turn <i>things</i> around!

That what is made would say to its maker, "He
did not make me"; | Shall the potter be considered as equal with
the clay,
Or what is formed say to him who formed it, "He
has no understanding"? |

The leaders of Judah have convinced themselves that they can determine truth on their own. They decide what is right for the nation. They make the plans. Isaiah describes it as a hiding from God, rather than a rejection of God. Even when we act as though God does not exist, there is a nagging sense in the human heart that He does. It is interesting to me how often modern people use the terminology of purpose and of right and wrong. They say things like, "The universe wants for us," or, "The universe teaches us," or, "The universe guides us." We can deny the Creator, but we cannot help using language as if there is some mind out there, controlling things. We can't help believing in right and wrong. Denial of God is a hiding from God, according to Isaiah.

Isaiah then uses the image of a potter to communicate the ridiculousness of declaring independence from God or in suggesting that we know better than God. That's like a ceramic bowl claiming, "Nobody made me." And furthermore, that he understands clay, and ceramics, and shape, and color much better than the Creator.

This failure of human sight in the realm particularly of spiritual and moral truth desperately needs a remedy.

of how those principles have worked out in this specific situation. The principles have come in these first three woes. The practical examples are going to come in the next three woes. That's what we're moving to in our next lesson. Let's end this lesson by summing up the three principles from chapters 28-29.

- (1) Isaiah 28:1–29, the first woe: When God's people reject His Word (9–13) and covenant (14–15), destruction follows (18–22), held within divine purposes (23–29)
- (2) Isaiah 29:1–14, the second woe: There is disaster and deliverance (1–8) but historical deliverance does not change people spiritually. This needs a further divine action (9–14), which is already planned.
- (3) Isaiah 29:15–24, the third woe: People may think to run the world without God (15), but He is the sovereign and His transforming purposes (16–17) will work out spiritually (18–19), morally and socially (20–21), fulfilling what began in Abraham (22) and establishing a truly renewed people (23–24).

Lesson 15 Isaiah 30 Security Is Not Found in Human Alliances

Introduction

War in our times

Russia invaded Ukraine. I struggle to imagine the evil in the mind of Vladimir Putin to make a choice that would cause so much death and pain, loss, to so many people, seemingly with the primary goal of satisfying his own lust for power and glory. The first map I saw showed the huge red landmass that is Russia looming over the small blue territory that is Ukraine. I immediately thought of our present section of Isaiah and Assyrian's invasion of Judah. Tiny Judah being swallowed up by the empire of the north as its army conquers city after city to surround the capital.

Ukraine is not as small, 44 million people, but small compared to Russia. We are watching destruction of towns and villages located in the invaders path to the capital. Kiev has been surrounded. We see diplomatic entanglement of regional powers and super-powers as NATO supports Ukraine and China supports Russia. All of that draws a comparison between the long ago war of our present section of Isaiah and this very real and present catastrophe.

Isaiah has already expressed to us a future vision ongoing wars among the nations. The city of man is chaotic. When have there not been wars in Europe? That last century began with "The War To End All Wars." The assumption among the victorious powers was that the West would never allow such a thing to happen again. At least not in Europe. They were wrong. Twenty years later, World War II forced historians to rename "The War To End All Wars," "World War I." Another 50 years after World War II and the West was shocked again as the former Yugoslav nations engaged in bloody conflict. That war came out of the upheaval of failed Communist states. But with the tearing back of the Iron Curtain, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of the Balkan war, surely now Europeans have entered into an era where war in Europe is unthinkable.

There is definite elitism in this idea. "Sure, there are wars in Africa and the Middle East. Of course, those people have wars. But civilized Europe?" Has secularism in Europe changed the heart of man? Does power no longer corrupt? Has the city of man stopped being the city of chaos?

The Biblical view of human civilization, combined with the history of humankind, combined with the apparent narcissism of a leader like Vladimir Putin all point towards the reality that wars will continue to occur through time all over our planet, until the true King vanquishes evil and establishes a new kingdom populated by individuals whose hearts have been transformed to love.

The comparison of Russia to Assyria, Ukraine to Judah works in an abstract sense. We see the evil of war. We see an invading empire. We see the rightness of standing with Ukrainians against this attack on their basic human dignity as created in the image of God.

So, there is some sense where the comparison is helpful. But very importantly, whenever these parallels occur to us between Old Testament events and modern events, we have to remember that Israel had a singularly unique role as the Old Covenant people of God. No other nation is the chosen people Israel.

Judah here will be rebuked for making an alliance with Egypt. Does that mean Ukraine should not make alliances with other nation states against Russia? And God promises Jerusalem that Assyria will be defeated. Does that promise apply now to Ukraine?

No. Neither of those comparisons apply from this text concerning Assyria and Judah. We can learn principles from this text that apply to our modern experience. But we have to carefully consider what the text meant in its original context to the original audience before we can begin to make applications for our own day. The people of Israel are a unique entity in salvation history. And even for Israel, salvation history took a major shift with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant. Israel is not the New Covenant people of God. That has changed.

Under the Old Covenant, the people of God understood their definition to be tied to the theocracy that was the geo-political state of Israel. That nation state is no longer the locus of God's people. The

definition of God's people is defined by the current covenant God is operating with. Right now, that is the New Covenant established by Jesus. The New Covenant is the constitution for the people of God in our current moment of salvation history. With the shift from old to new, we are no longer defined as a geo-political entity. We are a spiritual entity. We are the Church. We are all those who have truly believed in Jesus Christ. And we exist all over the world, in a multitude of nation states, as part of the population in each country.

The nation state of Ukraine is not parallel to the nation state of Judah in a theological sense. The church of Ukraine, the body of believers in Ukraine, they come much closer to paralleling Judah. And so, when we consider possible principles or promises from our present text that might apply to Ukraine, we have to keep in mind the shift from Old Covenant people of God to New Covenant people of God.

After we consider the text of Isaiah 30, I will come back to this question of possible application to our modern reality. I am not promising there will be significant application. I didn't choose this text to apply to Ukrainian situation. It just happens to be the text we're in right now as this crisis is unfolding.

The Second Set of Three Woes

The invasion of Judah by Assyria takes place at the end of our current major section titled, *The Lord of History*. Six woes are followed by the narrative of invasion and rescue. So there will be a couple of lessons before we get to the narrative of invasion. The six woes occur in two sets of three.

We have done the first three, and those three suggested three principles. And here are the three principles that we took out of those first three woes.

- (1) From the 1st woe, when God's people reject His Word and Covenant, destruction follows, according to God's divine purposes (28:1–29).
- (2) From the 2nd woe, there is disaster and deliverance in God's divine purposes, but historical deliverance does not change people spiritually. Spiritual deliverance needs a further divine action, which is already planned by God (29:1-14).
- (3) And from the 3rd woe, people may think to run the world without God, but He is the sovereign, and His transforming purposes will work out spiritually, morally and socially, fulfilling what began in Abraham to the establishment of a truly renewed people (29:15-24).

There are the three principles that Motyer suggested. We concluded with them in our last lesson. The first three woes communicate these principles without concretely identifying the historic occasion. There is plenty enough in those woes for us to guess which nations we are talking about, but neither Egypt nor Assyria are explicitly named, not until this 4th woe. Beginning with the 4th woe, the second set of three woes occurs in a historically defined situation.

So, first we have three woes that establish principles concerning Yahweh as the Lord of History. Then we have three woes that affirm those three principles through examples of practical application.

Motyer sets the first three woes in a parallel column beside the second three woes. The 1st woe parallels the 4th woe. The 2nd woe parallels the 5th woe. And the 3rd woe parallels the 6th woe.

I'll treat this 4th woe independently of the 1st woe. I'm not going to be going back and forth. I want us to get a feel for chapter 30. But in the end, I will consider how this 4th woe provides an example for the principle from the 1st woe. So, once again, here is that principle from the 1st woe, "When God's people reject His Word and Covenant, destruction follows, according to God's divine purposes (28:1–29)."

4th Woe (30:1-33)

Now to the 4th woe delivered in chapter 30. The structure is chiasmic. It's simple, there's an outer frame and an inner frame. The outer frames give us a human perspective, what we can see going on in the narrative. The inner frames give us God's perspective on these events.

A Human perspective: Alliance with Egypt will be no help (1–7)

B Divine perspective: our just God promises death for those who reject His Word (8–17)

B' Divine perspective: our patient God promises blessing for those who return to Him (18–26)

A' Human perspective: Invasion of Assyria will be no threat (27–33)²⁸

A Human perspective: Alliance with Egypt will be no help (1–7)

We start with the human perspective of the alliance with Egypt, which in the end will be of no help to Judah. This is Isaiah 30:1-7.

<p>¹ “Woe to the rebellious children,” “Who execute a plan, but not Mine, In order to add ² Who proceed down to Egypt To take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh ³ “Therefore the safety of Pharaoh will be your shame ⁴ “For their princes are at Zoan ⁵ “Everyone will be ashamed because of a people who cannot profit them, ⁶ The oracle concerning the beasts of the Negev. From where <i>come</i> lioness and lion, They carry their riches on the backs of young donkeys</p>	<p>declares the LORD, And make an alliance, but not of My Spirit, sin to sin; Without consulting Me, And to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! And the shelter in the shadow of Egypt, your humiliation. And their ambassadors arrive at Hanes. <i>Who are</i> not for help or profit, but for shame and also for reproach.” Through a land of distress and anguish, viper and flying serpent, And their treasures on camels’ humps, To a people who cannot profit <i>them</i>;</p>
<p>⁷ Even Egypt, whose help is vain and empty.</p>	<p>Therefore, I have called her “Rahab who has been exterminated.”</p>

We need to set up the historical context. This is going to take a little bit of time. We are now a couple of generations removed from the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-Pileser III, who is the one Ahaz sought out for help against Syria and Israel back in Isaiah 7. Tiglath-Pileser ended up subjugating all three smaller nations, Syria, Israel, and Judah. Israel later rebelled against Assyria and like Judah now, they at that time sought help from Egypt. It did not work then either. Tiglath-Pileser's son Shalmaneser V destroyed Israel's capital Samaria, exiled the people of Israel, and brought people from other lands to populate their cities. That was in 722 BC, the sixth year of Hezekiah's co-regency with his father Ahaz. 722 BC is also the date the next Assyrian emperor Sargon II began his rule. In fact, Sargon may have finished the siege of Samaria begun by Shalmaneser. Historians debate that. The siege took three years, so it is possible.

Typically, in the Ancient Near East, various vassal states rebelled from the current ruling empire any time there was a change of emperors. We are told in 2 Kings 18:7 that Hezekiah stopped paying tribute to Assyria. Presumably Hezekiah made that decision when Shalmaneser died, and Sargon took power.

That was a dangerous move. But we are told in that same verse, “The Lord was with him; wherever he went he prospered.” In spite of Hezekiah's lack of faith in turning to Egypt for help, he is classified in the book of Kings as one of only 8 good kings over Judah. The walk of faith has its ups and downs. that is true of Hezekiah. And we will get more into his specific story in later episodes.

²⁸ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 244.

	but not of My Spirit,
In order to add	sin to sin;
² Who proceed down to Egypt	Without consulting Me,
To take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh	And to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!
³ “Therefore the safety of Pharaoh will be your shame	And the shelter in the shadow of Egypt, your humiliation.
⁴ “For their princes are at Zoan	And their ambassadors arrive at Hanes.
⁵ “Everyone will be ashamed because of a people who cannot profit them,	<i>Who are</i> not for help or profit, but for shame and also for reproach.”

It is not clear whether an alliance with Egypt would in all cases be forbidden by God. Isaiah emphasizes that the leadership of Judah went down to Egypt without consulting God. The plan was theirs. The alliance was theirs. If they had asked God, God would have led them. We don't know to what, because they didn't ask God.

They already determined that they would ask Egypt to provide security and shelter. Their hearts were already set. There was no need to ask God. God might say “no.” What do you do when you think your parents might say, “No?” You don't ask. You just do it. They are rebellious children.

The result will be shame and humiliation. The security they sought apart from God will not meet their need. Isaiah is telling them, “Not only was it wrong of you to make an alliance without consulting God, but that people you put your trust in above God will fail you. You will be shamed through the failure of this alliance you are so proud of.”

In verses 6 and 7, Isaiah highlight's the uselessness of this treaty with the image of a baggage train taking treasure down to secure the treaty. The image employs the double meaning of the word, “oracle.” An oracle can be a message concerning what will happen in the future. The word “oracle” also means “burden.” This oracle or burden concerns the donkeys and camels, animals of burden that carry on their backs the treasure needed to make the alliance.

⁶ The oracle concerning the beasts of the Negev. From where <i>come</i> lioness and lion, They carry their riches on the backs of young donkeys	Through a land of distress and anguish, viper and flying serpent, And their treasures on camels' humps,
---	---

	To a people who cannot profit <i>them</i> ;
⁷ Even Egypt, whose help is vain and empty.	Therefore, I have called her “Rahab who has been exterminated.”

The beasts carried riches through dangerous territory for no reason. Egypt cannot profit you. This treaty is vain and empty. Isaiah ends with another word that has a double meaning. The word “Rahab” had become a name for Egypt. The word literally means “arrogance.” The last verset can mean two things. It can mean, “Rahab who has been exterminated.” It can also mean, “her arrogance ended.” Egypt, the proud one, will see an end of her arrogance as she fails to be of any value against Assyria. In our next section we are going to consider God's divine perspective.

B Divine perspective: our just God promises death for those who reject his word (8–17)

In verses 8-17, Isaiah exemplifies the role of covenant lawsuit prophet. He indicts Judah of more than neglecting to consult God. He charges them with refusal to hear God's word and willfully turning aside from God's path. He then proclaims the penalty for rejecting God's word. The indictment comes first. This is 8-11.

⁸ Now go, write it on a tablet before them That it may serve in the time to come	And inscribe it on a scroll, As a witness forever.
⁹ For this is a rebellious people, Sons who refuse to listen	false sons, To the instruction of the LORD;
¹⁰ Who say to the seers, “You must not see <i>visions</i> ”;	And to the prophets, “You must not prophesy

Speak to us pleasant words, ¹¹ Get out of the way, Let us hear no more	to us what is right, Prophesy illusions. turn aside from the path, about the Holy One of Israel.”
---	--

In the first woe Isaiah described how Judah’s leaders mocked his prophetic word as fit only for the nursery. This also sounds like Isaiah experienced firsthand these words of rejection. Judah’s leaders say, “You must not prophesy to what is right.” They don’t want to hear it. They want pleasant words. They want illusion, not truth. They tell him, “Get out of the way, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”

They were probably not so blunt in their rejection. It’s like today. People don’t mind hearing about Jesus as long it is a pleasant, permissive Jesus. But that is not Jesus. Jesus calls us to His own vision of holiness, to sacrifice, to a giving up of this life. And people are really saying, “Let us hear no more of that Jesus.”

In the same way, I imagine the leaders of Judah were saying, “We don’t want to hear your version of Yahweh, Isaiah.” But Isaiah was not providing them with just another option. Isaiah spoke of the true Holy One of Israel. Rejecting Isaiah’s vision of God was a rejection of God as He truly is.

Isaiah first communicated the charge that Judah has broken covenant with God, rejecting God, and God’s word. Now he communicates the consequence of breaking covenant with God, verses 12-17.

¹² Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, And have put your trust in oppression and guile,	“Since you have rejected this word and have relied on them,
¹³ Therefore this iniquity will be to you Whose collapse comes suddenly in an instant,	Like a breach about to fall, a bulge in a high wall,
¹⁴ Whose collapse is like the smashing of a potter’s jar, That a sherd will not be found among its pieces Or to scoop water from a cistern.”	So ruthlessly shattered To take fire from a hearth
¹⁵ For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said, In quietness and trust is your strength.”	“In repentance and rest you will be saved, But you were not willing,
¹⁶ And you said, “No, for we will flee on horses,” “And we will ride on swift horses,”	Therefore you shall flee! Therefore those who pursue you shall be swift.
¹⁷ One thousand will flee at the threat of one man; Until you are left as a flag on a mountain top	You will flee at the threat of five, And as a signal on a hill.

Can you see that image of the smashed potter’s jar? You know how you can break a glass in the dishwasher or drop a bowl in the sink, and it cracks into three or four pieces? A bit of that bowl could still be used to take fire from the hearth or water from a cistern. Isaiah says the collapse of Judah will be like dropping that bowl out of a second story window onto cement. The whole thing shatters in an instant. There are no useful little pieces. You can see this picture Isaiah paints.

What path had Isaiah counseled for Judah? “In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.” Repentance is turning from sin back to God. Rest does not necessarily mean doing nothing. To wait, to rest, can be a synonym for faith. It can mean a rest of the heart and mind in God as Savior. You can be very active in this kind of rest. But in your activity, you rest in the assurance that God has got you. The next verset communicates this, “In quietness and trust is your strength.” That does not mean you do nothing. You have a quietness of soul. And you know that, in whatever you need to do, the strength that saves you is not your strength. It is God’s strength.

That, Isaiah says, is the path they should have taken. God should have been refuge and strength. Isaiah goes on to say in 15b, “But you were not willing.” And so, you will fail, and you will run.

When Isaiah writes in verse 17, “One thousand will flee at the threat of one man,” he is applying Deuteronomy 32:30 to Judah.

How could one chase a thousand,
Unless their Rock had sold them,

And two put ten thousand to flight,
And the LORD had given them up?

And when he writes, "You will flee at the threat of five," he is reversing Leviticus 26:8 back upon Judah.

Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you by the sword.

Judah has walked away from covenant with God. And to, they are not going to experience the covenant promises of victory. Instead, those covenant promises from Moses are turned back onto them. Judah sought a military solution in an alliance with Egypt to go to war against Assyria. That solution has committed them to war. It will fail. And we have no way of knowing what kind of solution God would have provided had they trusted in Him. God could have solved the crisis diverting Assyria from ever invading at all. Or God could have called up a small force, like with Gideon's army, to push the Assyrians back. Or God could have called all of Judah out to fight. All of those could have been the way of faith. We can't know what would have happened if Judah's leaders had not rejected God's word and had not put their trust in their own foreign policy. We only know what did happen as a result of their unfaithfulness.

God is not going to prop up the unfaithful alliance with Egypt. He is going to allow Assyria to invade. But that will not be the end of the story. That is only half of the divine perspective. Isaiah also sees in this punishment the patience of God to bring about promised blessing on those who will repent and return to the way of faith.

B' Divine perspective: our patient God promises blessing for those who return to him (18-26)

The next section is our B'. We have just looked at B: indictment and punishment for rejecting God's word. That's how God sees the alliance with Egypt. B' adds the perspective of divine compassion. The section begins this way in verse 18.

¹⁸ Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you,

And therefore He waits on high to have
compassion on you.

For the LORD is a God of justice;

How blessed are all those who long for Him.

God longs to be gracious. He waits to have compassion. When we talk about people waiting, it's usually a way to speak about faith. When we talk about God waiting, it's a way to speak about His patience. Judah's counselors do not want anything to do with the Holy One of Israel. They have been described as rebellious children and rebellious sons in our first two sections of this woe. They have had enough direction from God the Father. They do not respect His word or His ways. They will make their own way without His foolish, outdated Word. They will make their own covenant with Egypt and mock Isaiah when he calls it a covenant of death. They are proudly confident in their own view. "What do you know about it, Isaiah? This is not death. This is life. This is the way the world works. They have power. We need that power on our side."

God will punish these wayward children so that some might turn back. Every loving parent longs to be gracious, waits to have compassion. But not every child will return to the path of faith. The child has to want relationship. The child has to want to return. They have to come to the realization of their need, like the prodigal son when he found himself eating out of a pig's trough and he finally saw that he had chosen a way of death. He still had a decision to make. He could still harden his thoughts against his father, or he could repent and return. He had to want to repair relationship with his father. That's 18b.

For the LORD is a God of justice;

How blessed are all those who long for Him.

Begins with the desire to return. But not only must wayward Judah want to repair relationship with God: they also have to believe that reconciliation is possible. Isaiah is telling them that, yes, from the divine perspective, God does welcome you back home. God has made a way for repair.

I wonder if this word was meant to apply to Hezekiah? This is what will be, if Hezekiah forsakes his false counselors and returns to his trust in God. Or is Isaiah looking further ahead to the New Covenant, or even further to the New Heaven and New Earth? What time do you think Isaiah is talking about when you hear these verses? Isaiah 30:19-26.

- ¹⁹ O people in Zion, inhabitant in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer.
He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you.
- ²⁰ Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression,
He, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher.
- ²¹ Your ears will hear a word behind you, "This is the way, walk in it,"
whenever you turn to the right or to the left.
- ²² And you will defile your graven images overlaid with silver, and your molten images plated with gold.
You will scatter them as an impure thing, and say to them, "Be gone!"
- ²³ Then He will give *you* rain for the seed which you will sow in the ground,
and bread *from* the yield of the ground, and it will be rich and plenteous;
on that day your livestock will graze in a roomy pasture.
- ²⁴ Also the oxen and the donkeys which work will eat salted fodder,
the ground
which has been winnowed with shovel and fork.
- ²⁵ On every lofty mountain and on every high hill
there will be streams running with water
on the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall.
- ²⁶ The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be seven times
brighter,
like the light of seven days,
on the day the LORD binds up the fracture of and heals the bruise He has inflicted.
His people

Let's follow the logic of the section. Verse 19, if Judah will cry out to God, and I think we have to interpret this as a cry of repentance as well as a cry for salvation, if they will turn to the father with words like the prodigal, God will hear and answer. Then in 20 and 21, God has punished with the bread of privation. But punishment always has the goal of leading us back to God. When they come back, God will teach them again with these words, "This is the way. Walk in it." God has been saying that all along. God is willing to be the guide. Now when they are ready to hear it, He does not cut them off. God wants to repair relationship with any child willing to repent.

The first thing God directs them to do is to rid themselves of idolatry. Turning from God always includes idolatry, whether it is actual idols of other gods, or a dependence on human ability as with Egypt, or on our own ability, or even a redefinition of who God is. That is idolatry. We can make God into an idol, just like the Israelites did at Sinai, fashioning a golden calf and calling it, "Yahweh." When we refuse to accept His own definition communicated through His own revealed Word, we are fashioning a god of our own liking. There is no abundant life in false gods. All false gods lead us towards the corruption of ourselves. When we turn back to God, the first step along the way of righteousness is to forsake those other things that we have put ahead of God, to forsake the urge to make God fit our culturally acceptable mode, to say to our idols in Isaiah's words, "Be gone!"

Walking in God's way leads to blessing. We know this is not always 100% true. It is generally true. But good people do suffer. Believers are hurt by the evil of the world. But we also know that life lived with God is the place where we experience God's goodness and blessing. We experience life in God by trusting Him, by working faithfully, by sharing with others, by raising our kids well. There is blessing and goodness through this earthly life for believers who walk God's path. That is a general promise for the people of God. We

experience it only in part now. Isaiah is not here addressing the problem of evil that we encounter when walking with Him, but he acknowledges there is a problem.

Verses 25 and 26 turn our minds to that reality of human evil. You notice the turn from blessing to war, and the acknowledgment that the Lord must bind up wounds we have received. We have been hurt.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>25 On every lofty mountain</p> <p>on the day of the great slaughter,</p> <p>26 The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be seven times</p> <p>on the day the LORD binds up the fracture of
His people</p> | <p>and on every high hill</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">there will be streams running with water</p> <p>when the towers fall.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>brighter,</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">like the light of seven days,</p> <p>and heals the bruise He has inflicted.</p> |
|--|---|

Up to verses 25-26 I could imagine this section applying to Judah after Hezekiah’s repentance and the defeat of the Assyrians. But these verses seem to elevate the situation. There was a “great slaughter” when Assyria’s army was struck down by God outside of the wall of Jerusalem. But “when the towers fall” suggests God’s victory over a human city. God is the one invading. And the moon shining as the sun and the sun shining seven times brighter, like the light of seven days suggests something more.

Remember in 24:23 how God’s glory in Zion will shine brighter than an embarrassed sun and moon. This reference of sun and moon brings that reality to mind, though here the brilliance of sun and moon suggests a renewed creation. And the reference to seven days suggests completion. I don’t think we have to decide whether this text applies to Hezekiah’s day, or to the time of New Covenant, or to the time of the New Zion. I think it speaks of the already-and-the-not-yet. The promises here begin the moment anyone repents and returns to God. That return and promised blessing are already available to the people of Judah. But the ultimate removal of evil and pain, that blessing is not yet true, not until God establishes a New Heaven and New Earth. That’s when the promise of fertile ground and abundant life for God’s people shifts from a partial reality to a full and guaranteed reality.

A’ Human perspective: Invasion of Assyria will be no threat (27–33)

The last section returns us to the human perspective of contemporary events. Isaiah refers to God’s defeat of Assyria by name. We will speak in coming chapters about this event, so I will not take much time on these verses now. Make note, though, of the reference to consuming fire, which was a theme of our last woe where Isaiah referred to Jerusalem as, “Ariel,” or, “altar hearth.” Assyria will be consumed on that altar.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>27 Behold, the name of the LORD comes from
a remote place;</p> <p>His lips are filled with indignation</p> <p>28 His breath is like an overflowing torrent,
To shake the nations back and forth in a sieve,</p> <p>29 You will have songs
And gladness of heart as when one marches to
<i>the sound of the flute,</i></p> <p>30 And the LORD will cause His voice of authority to
be heard,</p> <p>In fierce anger, and <i>in</i> the flame of a consuming fire</p> <p>31 For at the voice of the LORD Assyria will be terrified,</p> <p>32 And every blow of the rod of punishment,
Will be with <i>the music of</i> tambourines and lyres;</p> | <p>Burning is His anger and dense is <i>His</i> smoke;</p> <p>And His tongue is like a consuming fire;</p> <p>Which reaches to the neck,
And to <i>put</i> in the jaws of the peoples the bridle
which leads to ruin.</p> <p>as in the night when you keep the festival,
To go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of
Israel.</p> <p>And the descending of His arm to be seen</p> <p>In cloudburst, downpour and hailstones.</p> <p><i>When</i> He strikes with the rod.</p> <p>Which the LORD will lay on him,
And in battles, brandishing weapons, He will</p> |
|---|---|

33 For Topheth has long been ready,
He has made it deep and large,
The breath of the LORD, like a torrent of brimstone,

fight them.
Indeed, it has been prepared for the king.
A pyre of fire with plenty of wood;
sets it afire.

Don't stand against God. In the Bible, Topheth is connected with child sacrifice by fire to the god Molech. That's in both 2 Kings 23:10 and Jeremiah 7:31. The name may have come from two Hebrew words meaning, "disgraceful burning place." The Assyrians did not know they were climbing onto an altar of judgment when they surrounded Jerusalem. The human perspective of the narrative is this. We made an alliance with Egypt. That alliance failed. Assyria invaded Judah but was struck down outside the walls of Jerusalem.

That perspective has been conveyed here in A and A', the two outer frames of this section. B and B' give us God's divine perspective of the narrative. In B, Judah's alliance with Israel is seen as a rejection of God that demanded punishment. And in B', God communicates desire for wayward Judah to repent and His promise of blessing for those who do return to walk with Him.

The principle of our 1st woe back in chapter 28 was this: "When God's people reject His word and covenant, destruction follows, according to God's divine purposes (28:1-29)." We see in this woe the practical application of that principle. Judah's leaders rejected the word of God communicated through Isaiah. They rejected God's way in their hearts and sought security in an alliance with Egypt. Punishment from God must follow. That destruction was contained in God's divine purpose to bring Judah to repentance and to destroy the Assyrian army. Motyer sums up the application of this woe with this sentence.

"Refuge is sought in Egypt (1-7), rejecting the Lord's word (8-12), but his ultimate (13-26) and immediate (27-33) purposes are accomplished."²⁹

Conclusion

Does this lesson provide us with understanding or application of current events? Can we apply what we read here to Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

I believe we can, though cautiously. We proceed cautiously because the difference in context is quite significant. Only Israel is Israel. And we must now look at events through the filter of the New Covenant, not the Old. I also feel the need to proceed cautiously because I am neither Ukrainian nor Russian. There is much more value in hearing how a Ukrainian brother or sister would apply this text to the invasion of their homeland. So I am not going to say much.

What am I willing to say? I think Isaiah's two perspectives, the human and divine apply. And it may be better to refer to these as the physical and the spiritual perspectives.

We see from the human perspective an invasion of one nation by another. Russia initiated this war. With as much power as he holds I think we even have to say that Vladimir Putin initiated this war. It's on him. That was an evil act. Putin initiated human death and destruction by invading a sovereign, democratic nation. That is what we see from the human perspective.

We cannot yet see from a human perspective the outcome. We do not know if the Russian army will capture Kiev or be pushed back. We cannot see how long they might occupy Ukrainian territory. We continue to see from the physical perspective as events unfold. And we see pain and suffering. We see soldiers fighting. We see courage. We see hundreds of thousands, millions of civilians driven from their homes, and even out of their country. We see loss of life and destruction of property.

We may not be able to say that the people of God are under attack in the sense that Ukraine is not Israel. But all of humanity is part of God's common grace kingdom. We see people who belong to God, who have been made in the image of God, under attack, experiencing death, and pain, and trauma, and loss.

²⁹ Motyer, 228.

Specifically, though, we can say that the people of God are under attack in that the born-again believers who make up the Church of God in Ukraine are under attack. I read prayer requests from Cru staff in Ukraine. And that's just a little portion of the church in Ukraine. One staff woman just had a baby this week in Kiev as the bombing goes on. I read a conversation, another staff father who was wishing his 20 year-old son a happy birthday as he fights to defend his country. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are under attack.

Now, it's harder to look from a divine perspective. But from a divine perspective, Vladimir Putin and the nation of Russia will be held accountable for the sin of this war. Every nation is going to be held accountable for their own sins. Just like every individual is held accountable for their own sins. I am not singling Russia out. But for this war, Russia will be held accountable, Russia's leadership will be held accountable. They can stop the death and destruction.

We also see from the divine perspective that God allows sinful people to freely act, whether wickedly or righteously. God will bring about justice. God will bring His people into green pastures. That promise is for today, but not completely, and not for every person, and not right now in Ukraine. Ultimate justice waits for a New Heaven and a New Earth. Isaiah does not get into the problem of evil much more than that in chapter 30, but that problem is one of the greatest human problems. How do we believe in a God who allows this level of suffering that is now being allowed in Ukraine? And for that matter, that has been allowed before in Ukraine? You read the history these people have suffered. And that problem of pain and suffering, especially as it is going on in Ukraine, is a problem that Ukrainian brothers and sisters have to help us understand. We need to hear their spiritual perspective on these events. We have to hear their spiritual perspective, because they are the ones suffering the pain and loss.

Maybe the most significant application from these chapters in Isaiah is the call to faith. It is so simple, and it is being rejected by the leaders of Judah. We don't want to make it sound like an easy solution. It's not at all an easy solution. But it is the foundation of relationship with God. Security is not found in human nations or institutions. Security is found in God. Do not let your heart wander away from this most basic of covenants. By grace you are saved through faith. He is your life, your hope. Trust, pray, and act in faith.

Lord God, I do pray, I pray that you will end this war. I pray that Kiev will not fall. That Vladimir Putin will be humbled physically, if not spiritually. I pray for an end to death and suffering in Ukraine. I pray for the protection of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Protection for those who fight, protection for those who are trapped, protection for those who are separated from family, protection for those who have been forced to flee. I pray for the body of Christ, especially the body of Christ in Ukraine, and then in the countries surrounding Ukraine: in Poland; Hungary; Romania; Slovakia; Moldova; also in Belarus and Russia. May the body of Christ in these countries be Your hands, Lord, Your feet, Your heart, to help and care for those driven from their homes or for those displaced inside of Ukraine. May the wider body of Christ respond with prayer, and money, and relief for the people of Ukraine. May the community of nations stand with Ukraine to work to stop this war. I pray that our brothers and sisters in Ukraine who groan in prayer, who don't even know what to pray, that they would experience Your presence as Your Spirit groans in prayer with them. Please, Lord, stop this war. Stop the pain and the suffering. In the name of Jesus, our king who has suffered, and died, and raised again. Amen.

Lesson 16 Isaiah 31-35 The Stability of Your Times

Introduction

I am going to push us ahead in this lesson through the five chapters that contain our last two woes. We have overarching themes: Turn to God in unstable times. He is the Lord of History. He is your wisdom for this life. He is your hope for the future. He will lead the redeemed into a perfect Kingdom led by a perfect King.

God is trustworthy. Just as His promise of salvation from Assyria came true, so also His other promises for the future will come true. That future salvation will be experienced, in part, as history marches forward. But complete salvation requires a new kind of kingdom led by a new kind of king. That salvation will be completed only with the renewal of Heaven and Earth. Failure of human leadership over human kingdoms will continue to be a very real part of our present reality.

We will consider the last two of our six woes in this lesson. The first three woes established theological principles. The second three woes show those principles at work in the concrete historical situation of threat from Assyria and alliance with Egypt. The 1st woe pairs with the 4th, the 2nd with the 5th, and the 3rd with the 6th.

We can see the pairing of the woes in the details of the text. For example, the 1st woe and 4th woes are the only two places in Isaiah that God's wrath comes as a storm of hail; both woes include a scornful rejection of God's word; these are the only two woes that use the phrase, "taking refuge"; and in both cases that phrase points to false refuge in a foreign power. For the 2nd and 5th woes, God's altar hearth appears in the 2nd; fire and furnace appear in the 5th; reference to Mount Zion is only in these two woes; the imagery of hunger and thirst is common to both; and the unseeing eye in the 2nd is matched by the seeing eye in the 5th. For the 3rd and 6th woes, Lebanon is mentioned in both; as are the blind and the deaf; joy in the Lord; redemption; holiness; and spiritual transformation.

Now, these textual details that suggest the pairing motivate us to look closer at the themes in each pair of woes. And while certain themes overlap through all six, Motyer shows a principle supported by application in each pair. That pairing of themes is one way to summarize the many themes that weave together in this whole section.

We get these two summaries from the 1st and 4th woes. First, the principle in the 1st woe, "When God's people reject his Word and Covenant, destruction follows, according to God's divine purposes (28:1-29)." And then the application in the 4th woe, "Refuge is sought in Egypt, rejecting the Lord's word, even so, God's immediate and ultimate purposes are accomplished (30:1-33)."

Then we get these two summaries from the 2nd and 5th woes. First, the principle in the 2nd woe, "There is disaster and deliverance in God's divine purposes, but historical deliverance does not change people spiritually. Spiritual deliverance needs a further divine action, which is already planned by God (29:1-14)." And then the application in the 4th woe, "Divine deliverance scorns both Egypt's help and Assyria's enmity. Beyond lies the perfect kingdom with the true king and a transformed people. The pattern of history will be repeated: overthrow and transformation (31-32)."

Finally, we get these two summaries from the 3rd and 6th woes. First, the principle in the 3rd woe, "People may think to run the world without God, but He is the sovereign, and His transforming purposes will work out spiritually, morally and socially, fulfilling what began in Abraham and ending with the establishment of a truly renewed people (29:15-24)." And then the application in the 6th woe, "Traacherous people may seem to rule but divine sovereignty remains. The perfect kingdom, morally and socially and spiritually, will come. The enemy will finally be destroyed, and the redeemed will gather in Zion (33-35)".³⁰

³⁰ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 228.

Let's consider now the text to see how Isaiah calls us to trust in God as our rock for the present and our sure hope for the future.

5th Woe (31-32)

The 5th woe starts off with a prologue of disaster and deliverance and ends with a corresponding epilogue of humiliation and blessing. In between, Isaiah issues a first call to return to God, followed by a description of a society led by the ideal king. Then Isaiah issues a second call to return to God, followed by a description of a society transformed by the Spirit.³¹

A¹ - Prologue: disaster and deliverance (31:1-5)

We start with God's deliverance followed by disaster. These verses place us in the historic context of the Assyrian threat and failed Egyptian alliance. Isaiah 31:1-5.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>¹ Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
And trust in chariots because they are many
But they do not look to the Holy One of Israel,</p> <p>² Yet He also is wise and will bring disaster
But will arise against the house of evildoers</p> <p>³ Now the Egyptians are men and not God,
So the LORD will stretch out His hand,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">And all of them will come to an end together.</p> <p>⁴ For thus says the LORD to me, "As the lion growls over
the young lion over his prey,
And he will not be terrified at their voice
So will the LORD of hosts come down</p> <p>⁵ Like flying birds</p> | <p>And rely on horses,
And in horsemen because they are very strong,
nor seek the LORD!</p> <p>And does not retract His words,
And against the help of the workers of iniquity.</p> <p>And their horses are flesh and not spirit;
And he who helps will stumble and he who is
helped will fall,</p> <p>Against which a band of shepherds is called out,
nor disturbed at their noise,
to wage war on Mount Zion and on its hill."
so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">He will protect and deliver <i>it</i>; pass over and rescue <i>it</i>.</p> |
|--|--|

This woe starts very similarly to the 4th woe. There it was, "Woe to those who make an alliance but not of my Spirit." Here it is, "Woe to those who trust in chariots but do not look to the Holy One of Israel." Ground your decisions in the will of God. Seek Him first. The false security of Egypt will be quickly revealed, "He who helps will stumble," that's Egypt. "And he who is helped will fall," that's Judah.

Though Judah experiences severe consequences in the Assyrian invasion, God has decided to rescue them, but only after the false security of Egypt is removed. Isaiah imaged for us here a mixed metaphor of lions and birds of prey. Coming down to wage war on Mount Zion, God is like a lion standing over His prey. Assyria, marching up to Jerusalem, is like a band of shepherds trying to scare the lion off. God is not "disturbed at their noise." They are just noise to Him. The image is scary both for Assyria and for Jerusalem. The Assyrians are shepherds facing a lion. Jerusalem is the prey over which the lion stands. That's a powerful image of protectiveness. Try to pull a lamb shank out of a lion's mouth! It's also disconcerting if you are the lamb.

Verse 5 switches to the image of birds of prey hovering over the city. Isaiah follows the image with a quick succession of verbs, "The Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem, protect, deliver, pass over, rescue." I am reminded again of Deuteronomy 32:11 where God is pictured as an eagle protectively hovering over baby birds in a nest.

B¹ - A Call to return based on future deliverance (6-9)

In the next section, disaster and deliverance is followed by a call to repentance. Isaiah 31:6-9.

- ⁶ Return to Him from whom you have deeply defected, O sons of Israel. ⁷ For in that day every man will cast away his silver idols and his gold idols, which your sinful hands have made for you as a sin.

³¹ Motyer, 254.

<p>⁸ And the Assyrian will fall by a sword not of man, So he will not escape the sword, ⁹ "His rock will pass away because of panic, Declares the LORD, whose fire is in Zion</p>	<p>And a sword not of man will devour him. And his young men will become forced laborers. And his princes will be terrified at the standard," and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.</p>
---	---

You notice that reference to standard. This is that image of God as the King on the battlefield. The sons of Israel here is not a reference to Israel, the Northern Kingdom. That Kingdom has already been destroyed and exiled. The people of Israel from the days of old carry on in Judah. The Judeans are the "sons of Israel." Isaiah is calling these men to return. He charges them with deep defection from God. "In that day," is a phrase that often refers to the end times. I do not see that here. Assyria surrounding Jerusalem and God defeating Assyria. That is "the day."

Back in 2:20, Isaiah wrote, "In that day men will cast away to the moles and the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold." They cast away their idols in time of war to protect the precious metals of the statues. That's what the idols are reduced to. They are only objects. They cannot protect, or save, or bless, or fulfill. Here the casting off of idols could have the same idea of protecting silver and gold from invaders. But back in the last woe, in 30:21-22, walking with God required a turning from false gods, a destruction of graven images. I think here, Isaiah predicts the throwing off of idols as an act of repentance that happens just before God saves Judah - that is the moment that Hezekiah is going to believe - or in response to God having saved. You know, then they will cast off their idols because they will see the truth of who God is.

Isaiah predicts that salvation from Assyria will be a God thing, "A sword not of man will devour him." His rock, his princes fail. Whatever the Assyria soldier hopes in, whether it is his king, or his god, or the might of his army, that rock will fail. We see here the pairing of the 2nd and 5th woes with the theme of Ariel or altar hearth picked up again through the language of fire and furnace. This theme is not limited to the pairing of the 2nd and 5th woes. God's consuming or burning anger against Assyria occurs in each of the last three woes.

God's deliverance is not based on the goodness of Judah, but on his own decision to set apart Jerusalem as holy and to punish the Assyrian army for its wickedness. He is the Lord "whose fire is in Zion and whose furnace is in Jerusalem." Assyria will be sacrificed on the altar of God.

C¹ - The King and the new society (32:1-8)

Isaiah follows this call to return to God with the description of a righteous king ruling over a new society. Isaiah 32:1-8.

<p>¹ Behold, a king will reign righteously ² Each will be like a refuge from the wind Like streams of water in a dry country, ³ Then the eyes of those who see will not be blinded, ⁴ The mind of the hasty will discern the truth,</p>	<p>And princes will rule justly. And a shelter from the storm, Like the shade of a huge rock in a parched land. And the ears of those who hear will listen. And the tongue of the stammerers will hasten to speak clearly.</p>
---	--

That's a reversal of the spiritual blindness and deafness that exists in society of Judah, in Isaiah's day. Judeans in the future will have been transformed, "the hasty mind will discern truth, the stammerer will speak clearly."

<p>⁵ No longer will the fool be called noble, ⁶ For a fool speaks nonsense, To practice ungodliness To keep the hungry person unsatisfied ⁷ As for a rogue, his weapons are evil; To destroy <i>the</i> afflicted with slander, ⁸ But the noble man devises noble plans;</p>	<p>Or the rogue be spoken of <i>as</i> generous. And his heart inclines toward wickedness: and to speak error against the LORD, And to withhold drink from the thirsty. He devises wicked schemes Even though <i>the</i> needy one speaks what is right. And by noble plans he stands.</p>
--	--

Judah's men of prestige are fools and rogues. That is not a hard image to picture. We think of so many men and women in business or politics, the words do often apply. The people of this new society will see through the nonsense and wicked schemes of such men. Imagine a place where the rogue and fool are never allowed to lead, but instead discerning members of society follow the noble man and are attracted to him by the nobility of his plan.

B² - Call to hear in the light of future destruction (9–14)

In the next section, Isaiah again challenges the people of Judah to return to God. This time he addresses the women, calling them, "complacent daughters." The effect of addressing both men and women is to include the whole of wayward society, not just men, not just women: everyone. This is Isaiah 32:9-14.

<p>⁹ Rise up, you women who are at ease, You complacent daughters,</p> <p>¹⁰ Within a year and <i>a few days</i> For the vintage is ended,</p> <p>¹¹ Tremble, you <i>women</i> who are at ease; Strip, undress</p> <p>¹² Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields,</p> <p>¹³ For the land of my people Yea, for all the joyful houses</p> <p>¹⁴ Because the palace has been abandoned, Hill and watch-tower A delight for wild donkeys,</p>	<p><i>And</i> hear my voice; Give ear to my word. You will be troubled, O complacent <i>daughters</i>; <i>And</i> the <i>fruit</i> gathering will not come. Be troubled, you complacent <i>daughters</i>; and put <i>sackcloth</i> on <i>your</i> waist, for the fruitful vine, <i>in which</i> thorns <i>and</i> briars shall come up; <i>and for</i> the jubilant city. the populated city forsaken. have become caves forever, a pasture for flocks;</p>
--	---

The call to hear contrasts the new society described in the earlier verses. The men and women of present-day Judah have not given ear to God's Word. They do not listen. They do not obey. The destruction described here initially refers to the Assyrian invasion. The complacent daughters of Judah will put sackcloth around their waists and beat their breasts in memory of fields full of harvest and vines full of fruit. They are all destroyed. This will happen in a year and few days, it says. Since Sennacherib invades in 701 BC, the dating of this prophecy is a year and few days earlier: sometime in 702 BC. And yet, even with that concrete identification, the devastation seems on a wider scale than the invasion by Assyria, which was eventually pushed back. They didn't take Jerusalem. The palace was not abandoned. Here, thorns and briars come up in the fields. The palace and city are forsaken to become a delight of wild donkeys and pastured flocks. And that could be exaggerated imagery about the invasion of Assyria. Or Isaiah has turned his vision ahead, to end time events, seeing the invasion of Assyria as foreshadowing the more complete future downfall of the city of man.

C² - The Spirit and the new society (15–18)

Desolation sits on the city until a new society is formed. That new society is briefly described in our next section. Just as the earlier call for repentance was followed by the description of a new society led by a new King, this second call to repentance is followed by a new society inaugurated through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Let me go back to verse 14, because verse 15 makes sense when you read the two together.

<p>¹⁴ Because the palace has been abandoned, Hill and watch-tower A delight for wild donkeys,</p> <p>¹⁵ Until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high,</p> <p>¹⁶ Then justice will dwell in the wilderness</p> <p>¹⁷ And the work of righteousness will be peace,</p> <p>¹⁸ Then my people will live in a peaceful habitation,</p>	<p>the populated city forsaken. have become caves forever, a pasture for flocks; And the wilderness becomes a fertile field, And the fertile field is considered as a forest. And righteousness will abide in the fertile field. And the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever. And in secure dwellings and in undisturbed resting places;</p>
---	---

A² - Epilogue: humiliation and blessedness (19–20)

Our 5th woe ends with a two-verse epilogue that points again to the dual theme of disaster and deliverance, briefly.

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 19 | And it will hail when the forest comes down, | And the city will be utterly laid low. |
| 20 | How blessed will you be, you who sow beside
all waters, | Who let out freely the ox and the donkey. |

That is recapping. There was humiliation, followed by blessing for the faithful.

6th Woe (33-35)

Now, the final woe. This one is the longest, covering three chapters. The chapters are short, though. The total length of all three is only 51 verses. Simply put, the woe has an A, B, A, B, A pattern moving from deliverance to judgment, to deliverance to judgment, to deliverance. The first deliverance-judgment pair concerns Judah and is rooted historically in the present Assyrian threat. The second deliverance-judgment pair looks ahead to end times and takes on a universal scope. And then, the final section of deliverance pictures a pilgrimage to Zion.³²

A1 - The Salvation of Zion 33:1-6

We begin with the salvation of Zion. Unlike the first five woes, this one is not directed towards Israel or Judah, but towards their adversary. I'll start with just the first verse 33:1.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Woe to you, O destroyer, while you
were not destroyed;
As soon as you finish destroying, you
will be destroyed; | And he who is treacherous, while <i>others</i>
did not deal treacherously with him.
As soon as you cease to deal treacherously, <i>others</i>
did deal treacherously with you. |
|---|--|---|

That is basically saying, "What you have done it wasn't done to you, but you've done it now and so it's going to come back on your head. You wanted to be a destroyer? You are going to be destroyed." I am assuming the destroyer is Assyria, and this is the deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyria, though the lack of direct reference foreshadows an ultimate deliverance. Verses 2-6 are a little hard to pin down. First, the speech is directed to God, and then it is about God. Also, in one verse, the speaker switches from first person plural to third person plural and back again to first person plural. See if you can pick that up.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 2 | O LORD, be gracious to us; we have waited for You. Be their strength every morning,
Our salvation also in the time of distress. | |
| 3 | At the sound of the tumult peoples flee; | At the lifting up of Yourself nations disperse. |
| 4 | Your spoil is gathered <i>as</i> the caterpillar gathers; | As locusts rushing about men rush about on it. |
| 5 | The LORD is exalted, for He dwells on high; | He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness. |
| 6 | And He will be the stability of your times, | A wealth of salvation, wisdom and knowledge;
The fear of the LORD is his treasure. |

We can make sense of the shifts in the text if we assume Isaiah is speaking in the presence of Judean believers. That would explain how he can speak both of "we" and of "them," including himself in one moment as one of the faithful, or in another moment focusing his remarks on those present other than himself. So, he can switch from "we" to "they." And by assuming his speech is a prayer, we can explain why he first speaks to God and then speaks about God. We kind of do both things when we pray. Try to get a picture in mind of Isaiah praying while I read the text again. Imagine a scene, maybe in the Temple, where he is gathered with a group of faithful believers, including the repentant Hezekiah. Imagine Isaiah praying this.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 2 | O LORD, be gracious to us; we have waited for You. Be their strength every morning,
Our salvation also in the time of distress. | |
| 3 | At the sound of the tumult peoples flee; | At the lifting up of Yourself nations disperse. |

³² Motyer, 262.

- ⁴ Your spoil is gathered as the caterpillar gathers; As locusts rushing about men rush about on it.
⁵ The LORD is exalted, for He dwells on high; He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness.
⁶ And He will be the stability of your times, A wealth of salvation, wisdom and knowledge;
The fear of the LORD is his treasure.

In a time of great instability, Isaiah declares in this prayer to the faithful listeners, "The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high...He will be the stability of your times." And Isaiah reminds them of a verse that is mentioned in Proverbs, mentioned in Job, mentioned in Ecclesiastes. It is the theme of wisdom literature. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." You have forgotten this. Isaiah just puts his little twist on it. He says,

A wealth of salvation, wisdom and knowledge; The fear of the LORD is his treasure.

The fear of the Lord is the treasure of the Lord that He offers to you, because it is to you wisdom, and knowledge, and salvation. When things are unstable and you don't know what to do, if you will go to the Lord and follow Him, His wisdom, His presence, His promises become, for you, stability.

B1 - The Judgment of the peoples (33:7-12)

The prayer for deliverance is followed by a declaration of judgment against the peoples who have caused suffering in Judah. God did not prevent Assyria from invading. But He will avenge himself on Assyria. Isaiah 33:7-9

- ⁷ Behold, their brave men cry in the streets, The ambassadors of peace weep bitterly.
⁸ The highways are desolate, the traveler has ceased,
He has broken the covenant, he has despised the cities,
He has no regard for man.
⁹ The land mourns *and* pines away, Lebanon is shamed *and* withers;
Sharon is like a desert plain, And Bashan and Carmel lose *their foliage*.

Invasion has happened. Jerusalem is surrounded. Brave men cry in the streets. That word, "Brave men," is literally, "Arielites." They are the men of Ariel. They are the Jerusalemites. They are the people of the altar hearth. Ambassadors of peace were sent by Hezekiah to pay off Sennacherib. Sennacherib accepts the tribute but decides to destroy Jerusalem anyway. The ambassadors of peace weep bitterly. Then God steps in.

- ¹⁰ "Now I will arise," says the LORD, "Now I will be exalted, now I will be lifted up.
¹¹ "You have conceived chaff, you will give birth My breath will consume you like a fire.
to stubble;
¹² "The peoples will be burned to lime, Like cut thorns which are burned in the fire.

A2 - The first universal proclamation: Zion and its King (33:13-24)

The text then shifts to deliverance in verse 13. The scope is universal. Those who are far away are called to hear what God has done, and those who are near are called to acknowledge God's might. I am reminded of Paul's language in Ephesians 2:13 and 17, where believing Gentiles are those who are far away and believing Jews are the ones who are near. The two are made one in Jesus Christ. I wonder if Paul got that language from here. We begin with 33:13-17.

- ¹³ "You who are far away, hear what I have done; And you who are near, acknowledge My might."
¹⁴ Sinners in Zion are terrified; Trembling has seized the godless.
"Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning?"
¹⁵ He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity, He who rejects unjust gain
And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe; He who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed
And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil;
¹⁶ He will dwell on the heights, His refuge will be the impregnable rock;
His bread will be given *him*, his water will be sure.
¹⁷ Your eyes will see the King in His beauty; They will behold a far-distant land.

God has called everyone, those who are far off and those who are near. They are to see what has happened in Jerusalem. “Sinners are terrified; trembling has seized the godless.” They are saying, “Who among us can live with the consuming fire?” They mean the consuming fire of God’s wrath. God’s answer? “The righteous can – those who speak with sincerity and reject unjust gain, who shut their eyes from looking at evil.”

The problem that none can actually be righteous in the eyes of God is not addressed here. What is necessary is righteousness. And those who are righteous are the ones who are going to live on the Hill of the Lord. God accepts those whose desire is to live according to the moral vision of His nature. How God handles the sin of the faithful will be addressed in the next major section of Isaiah, the Book of the Servant. For now, it is enough to know that the righteous will see the King in His beauty. The terror of the sinner is removed in verse 18. You will be able to meditate on terror and realize that there is no invading army to fear. You don’t have to be afraid. The Majestic One makes you secure in the Kingdom of Zion.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>18 Your heart will meditate on terror:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Where is he who counts the towers?”</p> <p>19 You will no longer see a fierce people,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Of a stammering tongue which no one understands.</p> <p>20 Look upon Zion, the city of our appointed feasts;</p> <p>Its stakes will never be pulled up,</p> <p>21 But there the majestic <i>One</i>, the LORD, will be for us</p> <p>On which no boat with oars will go,</p> <p>22 For the LORD is our judge, The LORD is our lawgiver,</p> | <p>“Where is he who counts? Where is he who weighs?”</p> <p>A people of unintelligible speech which no one comprehends,</p> <p>Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an undisturbed habitation, a tent which will not be folded;</p> <p>Nor any of its cords be torn apart.</p> <p>A place of rivers <i>and</i> wide canals</p> <p>And on which no mighty ship will pass—</p> <p>The LORD is our king; He will save us—</p> |
|---|---|

God will save Judah from foreign invaders, both on land and on water, “On which no boat with oars will go, and on which no mighty ship will pass.” He is assuring us that the flowing rivers and wide canals of God’s fertile Kingdom will not be invaded by military vessels. Earth and sea are under His domain.

The word, “Lord,” in verse 22 is, “Yahweh,” the Covenant name of God. “Yahweh is our judge, Yahweh is our lawgiver, Yahweh is our king; He will save us.” As judge, He determines who has kept faith, who has loved God and who has loved his neighbor. As lawgiver, He communicates civil laws for ordering society and higher laws for living righteously. As king, He protects us and provides for our well-being. He will save us.

Oswalt considers this verse 22 to be the climax of chapters 28-33. He writes, “Throughout, the issue has been: can we trust God to save us? Here, however, the alternative is expressed for the people by the prophet: ‘Yes, he is our king, and he alone will save us.’”³³

This proclamation of universal deliverance ends with the odd image of a crippled boat that cannot spread out its sail or move. The ship stalls in the water and so it becomes prey to any military vessel.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>23 Your tackle hangs slack;</p> <p>Then the prey of an abundant spoil will be divided;</p> <p>24 And no resident will say, “I am sick”;</p> | <p>It cannot hold the base of its mast firmly,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Nor spread out the sail.</p> <p>The lame will take the plunder.</p> <p>The people who dwell there will be forgiven <i>their</i> iniquity.</p> |
|--|---|

There is a surprising turn in the verse. Surprisingly, the prey will take the spoil and the lame, the plunder. Isaiah is reminding his listeners, “It is not by your strength that you have gained treasure. You did not defeat Assyria. You were like a boat dead in the water. Your inheritance comes from the mighty arm of God.” That is true of this historic moment. That is true of your future salvation. You

³³ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 1-39*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 604.

are an ineffective ship that limps along. You cannot save yourself. And yet, you are saved. The last verse points towards the deliverance that Judah needs. They did need salvation from the army of Assyria. But what then? What then? They still need a greater deliverance from sickness, and death, and their own sinful hearts. In the new Zion “no resident will say, ‘I am sick’; the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.” Again, Isaiah does not explain how they can be forgiven until the Book of the Servant. But this is the vision, that somehow, we will live in this new society as a forgiven people, as righteous.

B2 - The Second Universal Proclamation (34:1-17)

Paired with this universal proclamation of salvation, chapter 34 gives us a universal proclamation of judgment. I will read the whole chapter to let the weight of the proclamation sink in. This is the destruction of the city of man, the great battle at the end of the age. The universal proclamation announces to everyone the consequence of rebelling against God, our Creator and King. Isaiah 34:1-17.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>¹ Draw near, O nations, to hear;
Let the earth and all it contains hear,</p> <p>² For the LORD’s indignation is against all the nations,
He has utterly destroyed them, given them over to slaughter.</p> <p>³ So their slain will be thrown out,
And the mountains will be drenched with their blood.</p> <p>⁴ And all the host of heaven will wear away,
All their hosts will also wither away
Or as <i>one</i> withers from the fig tree.</p> <p>⁵ For My sword is satiated in heaven,
And upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction.</p> <p>⁶ The sword of the LORD is filled with blood,
with the blood of lambs and goats,
For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah</p> <p>⁷ Wild oxen will also fall with them
Thus their land will be soaked with blood,</p> <p>⁸ For the LORD has a day of vengeance,
⁹ Its streams will be turned into pitch,
And its land will become burning pitch.</p> <p>¹⁰ It will not be quenched night or day;
From generation to generation it will be desolate;</p> <p>¹¹ But pelican and hedgehog will possess it,
And He will stretch over it the line of desolation and the plumb line of emptiness.</p> <p>¹² Its nobles—there is no one there <i>whom</i> they may
proclaim king—</p> <p>¹³ Thorns will come up in its fortified towers,
It will also be a haunt of jackals</p> <p>¹⁴ The desert creatures will meet with the wolves,
Yes, the night monster will settle there</p> <p>¹⁵ The tree snake will make its nest and lay <i>eggs</i>
there,
Yes, the hawks will be gathered there,</p> <p>¹⁶ Seek from the book of the LORD, and read:
None will lack its mate.</p> <p>For His mouth has commanded,</p> <p>¹⁷ He has cast the lot for them,
They shall possess it forever;</p> | <p>and listen, O peoples!
and the world and all that springs from it.</p> <p>And <i>His</i> wrath against all their armies;
And their corpses will give off their stench,</p> <p>And the sky will be rolled up like a scroll;
As a leaf withers from the vine,</p> <p>Behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom</p> <p>It is sated with fat,
With the fat of the kidneys of rams.
And a great slaughter in the land of Edom.</p> <p>And young bulls with strong ones;
And their dust become greasy with fat.</p> <p>A year of recompense for the cause of Zion.
And its loose earth into brimstone,</p> <p>Its smoke will go up forever.
None will pass through it forever and ever.</p> <p>And owl and raven will dwell in it;
And all its princes will be nothing.</p> <p>Nettles and thistles in its fortified cities;
And an abode of ostriches.</p> <p>The hairy goat also will cry to its kind;
And will find herself a resting place.</p> <p>And it will hatch and gather <i>them</i> under its
protection.
Every one with its kind.</p> <p>Not one of these will be missing;
And His Spirit has gathered them.
And His hand has divided it to them by line.
From generation to generation they will dwell in it.</p> |
|---|---|

This is the final battle, the result of the final battle. Humanity is gone. The wild animals possess the land. The judgment is on the land of all who take up arms against Zion. It will be laid waste, full of brimstone and burning pitch. It sounds like Mordor. And so, Isaiah draws again on this theme of the desolate city turned into wilderness. It is the apocalyptic vision of a Moscow, or Rome, or New York. Husks of buildings, trash littered streets, briars and thorns growing out of broken pavement, animals of the desert night prowling through the ruins.

The enemies of God are pictured as sacrifice on the altar. The sword of God is the priest's tool used for butchering animals. That is why it is sated with fat. And that is one of the symbols sacrifice communicates to us. The wages of sin is death. It's not the animal that needs to die. The animal dies to symbolize the curse a human being deserves for wicked rebellion against the goodness of God. That sacrifice is symbolic. Here it is not symbolic. Here, the enemies of Zion pay the price for their rebellion against God.

The ruin engulfs more than opposing kingdoms. "All the host of heaven will wear away and the sky be rolled up as a scroll." Sometimes "host of heaven" means "angels." Here, I think, it means the Moon and the stars of the night. The image is dark and terrifying. And yet, at the same time, it is also an end of sin, and injustice, and oppression, and death. It is the night before the new day. That's how Horatio Spafford understood it when he wrote the hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul."

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
A song in the night, oh my soul!

A3 - *The pilgrimage of the redeemed to Zion through a renewed world (35:1-10)*

And so, Isaiah takes us from the night of universal judgment to a new day. The final section of this woe pictures the redeemed making pilgrimage through a renewed world to Zion. Isaiah 35:1-10.

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | The wilderness and the desert will be glad, | And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus |
| 2 | It will blossom profusely
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
They will see the glory of the LORD, | And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy.
The majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
The majesty of our God. |
| 3 | Encourage the exhausted, | and strengthen the feeble. |
| 4 | Say to those with anxious heart,
Behold, your God will come <i>with</i> vengeance; | "Take courage, fear not.
The recompense of God will come, but He will
save you." |
| 5 | Then the eyes of the blind will be opened | and the ears of the deaf be unstopped. |
| 6 | Then the lame will leap like a deer,
For waters will break forth in the wilderness | And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.
And streams in the Arabah. |

The eyes of the blind opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame leap, and the mute shout for joy - the people of God have been transformed. No longer spiritually blind, and deaf, and lame, and mute as the people of Judah have been described. God has made us to see. He has set our tongues loose to speak truth freely. We will encounter this language again later in the Servant songs. Here, the faithful walk on a highway of holiness as the desolate land is transformed.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 7 | The scorched land will become a pool
In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, | And the thirsty ground springs of water;
Grass <i>becomes</i> reeds and rushes. |
| 8 | A highway will be there, a roadway,
The unclean will not travel on it,
And fools will not wander <i>on it</i> . | And it will be called the Highway of Holiness.
But it <i>will</i> be for him who walks <i>that way</i> , |
| 9 | No lion will be there,
These will not be found there. | Nor will any vicious beast go up on it;
But the redeemed will walk <i>there</i> , |

Lesson 17 Isaiah 36-39 Historical Background

Introduction

Let me say from the start, this lesson is a historical background lesson. I am not teaching through the text of Isaiah 36-39. If you are not that interested in the historical context, feel free to skip ahead to the next lesson, where I focus on interpreting the narrative as it stands. If you are interested in the historical context and addressing some confusing details in the text, then stay with me here.

Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel is the one true, sovereign Lord of History. Isaiah emphasizes that claim through a particular event in the reign of Hezekiah, King of Judah. That event is the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib, King of Assyria. Isaiah wrote the prophetic book of Isaiah 15 to 20 years after that invasion. His audience lived through these events. They experienced two or three years of tense build up to the invasion, they lived through the devastation of their nation, and they remember the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem.

The six woes of chapters 28-35 are written to remind the people what God said prior to the invasion. There are always multiple perspectives about what may happen before events begin to happen. Prime minister of Britain, Neville Chamberlain declared after his last meeting with Hitler in 1938,

I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Now I recommend you go home, and sleep quietly in your beds.³⁴

Sadly, Chamberlain misunderstood Hitler. Winston Churchill had gotten him right. Hitler invaded Poland the next year, starting World War II.

Bringing it up to our times, we can all remember what it was like in February of 2022 as the world kicked off the winter Olympics and Russia amassed troops on the border of Ukraine. Will Russia invade? That was the big question. Those who thought Putin would never dare versus those who believed war was about to happen. Unless you were living in Ukraine it is impossible to fully assess how intense wondering about what it could be.

Through the six woes, Isaiah is reminding Judah what that time was like in the lead up to invasion. Their moment was a moment in history unlike any other. God had placed Isaiah in Jerusalem to proclaim His sovereign perspective. So, that was one of the voices included in all the voices of what might happen. They actually had the voice of God: this will happen. So, along with the confidence of leaders who had come up with a foreign policy strategy to save Judah through alliance with Egypt, along with those who were still afraid and confused, along with those who refused to believe that God would allow something so awful to happen, along with all those voices, Isaiah gave voice to the mind of God. He proclaimed what would happen before it happened.

And the news was not good. The forecast was awful. Isaiah condemned the treaty with Egypt as a terrible mistake. He faulted the leaders of Judah for establishing a foreign policy with no consideration of God's will. They did not seek God out. They did not include Isaiah in their discussions. There was no prayer and fasting. God is going to save Jerusalem, but not until Assyria causes much destruction. That's the word that was declared in all six woes. Here is a selection from the first woe, Isaiah 28:18 and 22.

- ¹⁸ "Your covenant with death will be canceled, And your pact with Sheol will not stand;
When the overwhelming scourge passes through, Then you become its trampling *place*.
²² And now do not carry on as scoffers, Or your fetters will be made stronger;
For of decisive destruction I have heard from the Lord GOD of hosts
on all the earth.

³⁴ Christopher Klein. *Chamberlain Declares "Peace for Our Time"* (History, Jan. 3, 2020) www.history.com/news/chamberlain-declares-peace-for-our-time-75-years-ago.

This is the word Isaiah heard from God. Assyria is going to invade. The land of Judah will be scoured. This suffering and humiliation will bring the leaders of Judah to a crisis point where their faith will be tested.

Isaiah's prophecy then skips the story of the invasion. We are not given those details. He moves from the pre-invasion debate straight to the moment of crises. That's where we are now in chapters 36-37.

What we do not get from Isaiah is the narrative of death and destruction that led up to deliverance. He did not need to provide that story for his audience. They lived through it. Nobody has forgotten the fear, and suffering, and loss. Entire cities had been leveled. Thousands died and thousands more were taken as slaves.

What Isaiah needs to remind his audience of is the sovereignty of God over historical events, the judgment of God against the wickedness of man, and the assurance of salvation and rest for those who will trust in God.

They don't need reminders about the historical events of the invasion. We do. To interpret well the events leading up to the crises and the resolution of the crises, we need the historical context. We need to fill in some gaps of knowledge that Isaiah assumes.

That's what we are doing in this lesson. We are going to cover the historical background of Isaiah 36-37, along with filling in some knowledge gaps. Another reason to dedicate a whole lesson to historical context is to have the space to address several confusing or challenging historical details that come up in the text. By considering those background questions now, we can give full attention to the Scripture in our next two lessons.

I am going to start with the narrative in chapters 38-39 first and then come back to the narrative in chapters 36-37. Here is a quick reminder of the Assyrian kings we are dealing with.

The main two Assyrian kings to remember in connection with Isaiah are Tiglath-Pileser III and Sennacherib. Tiglath-Pileser is the king Hezekiah's father Ahaz entered into treaty with to protect Judah from Israel and Syria. Assyria was on the rise under Tiglath-Pileser. Ahaz did not realize the yoke he was committing Judah to when he invited that lion of Assyria into his backyard.

The next two kings, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II may have both played a role in the sack of Israel. Shalmaneser began the invasion. But the siege of the capital city Samaria took three years, ending in 722, the year Sargon became king. Sargon may have been a general at the battle, or may even have completed the siege as king. And around this time Hezekiah probably stopped paying tribute to Assyria when leadership transitioned from Shalmaneser to Sargon.

Sargon's son Sennacherib took over the reins of Assyria in 705 BC. And before turning his attention towards wayward Judah in the south, Sennacherib first fought battles to the west, then to the east, and then to the north. Finally, in 701 BC he was ready to bring the southern vassals back in line. This was a typical process of reconsolidation when the empire passed from one king to another and various vassals all around took the opportunity to stop paying tribute and to flex their own muscles, and it was up to the new emperor to show them who is boss.

Isaiah 37:38 mentions Esarhaddon as the son who succeeds Sennacherib. And though Esarhaddon does expand the rule of Assyria, defeating Egypt, making Assyria the largest known empire up to that point in history, he comes to power later, at the end of Isaiah's life and he does not focus into our prophecy. So, from all those names, if you remember Tiglath-Pileser who goes with Ahaz, and then Sennacherib who is connected to Hezekiah. You can just remember those two.

Okay. So, before we address background issues concerning the invasion of Sennacherib in chapters 36 and 37, let's consider some background to the story of Hezekiah's illness, recovery, and reception of Babylonian emissaries in chapters 38 and 39.

Hezekiah's illness, recovery and the Babylonian emissaries

The General Date of the narrative

In the story of Hezekiah's recovery from illness, God grants him an additional 15 years of life. The dating of that 15 years is a little complicated. Several Judean kings co-reigned with their father before taking on sole reign when their father died. Concerning Hezekiah, Walter Kaiser writes,

Hezekiah began his reign as a coregent with his father Ahaz for thirteen years of his forty-two total years of reign from 729 to 686 BC. Hezekiah was only eleven years old when he began his coregency with his father Ahaz [...] He was twenty-five years of age when he began his sole reign in 715 BC.³⁵

So, this is the complicated part. References to the year of Hezekiah's reign can refer back either to the beginning of his coregency in 729 BC, or his sole regency in 715 BC, and we have to figure out based on context. For example, 2 Kings 18:10 tells us Samaria fell in the sixth year of Hezekiah's reign. Was that the sixth year from the start of his coregency, or the sixth year from the start of his sole reign? This is a helpful example because we know Samaria fell in 722 BC. So, six years earlier would have been 728 or 729 BC. That's a reference to the beginning of his coregency, while his father Ahaz was still alive.

2 Kings 18:2 tells us "[Hezekiah] was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem." If that twenty-nine-year reigns began with his coregency back in 729 BC, then Hezekiah dies in 700 BC, one year after Sennacherib's invasion. That creates a problem with the promise in Isaiah 38 that Hezekiah has another 15 years to live.

But if we recognize that 2 Kings 18:2 refers not to the beginning of Hezekiah's coregency with his father, but to the beginning of his sole reign, that reign would last 29 years from 715, the year Ahaz died. And 29 years from 715 BC takes his reign to 686 BC. That does match the promise in Isaiah 38. The invasion happened in 701, so another 15 years takes us to the same year, 686 BC.

So, this is one of those potentially confusing things to recognize. We need to take into account two possible starting dates of Hezekiah's reign: his coregency and his sole regency in order to bring together well the various references that we have in the narratives. Let's see if we can identify when Hezekiah recovered from his illness and these Babylonian emissaries came more precisely.

The More Precise Date of the Narrative

Adding and subtracting years is not precise. Because if it says "29 years," we don't know if it's exactly 29 years and no extra months; or is it 29 years plus a few months; or is it less than 29 years, almost 29 years. So, we do not know if the emissaries came in 701 BC exactly or maybe a little before that, or a little after that. We could easily assume the invasion in chapters 36-37 comes before the sickness in chapters 38-39 because that's the order of appearance in Isaiah, but it is not going to be that simple.

So, when did the emissaries come? A problem with the Babylonian emissaries coming in 701 after the invasion is that Hezekiah stripped his treasury to pay tribute to Sennacherib. There would not have been much left to impress the Babylonians. And that's an important part of the story. Another problem with the Babylonians coming after the invasion is that they congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery from sickness, but they do not make any comments about God's victory over the Assyrians. And that's odd. If Sennacherib's army, the most powerful army in the world, had just been abolished, you'd think that Babylonians would congratulate Hezekiah about that.

Merodach-Baladan, the Babylonian king mentioned in 39:1 who sent the emissaries was a cat with nine lives. He first rebelled against Assyria by establishing himself king of Babylon during the reign of Sennacherib's father Sargon. Sargon marched on Babylon, and Merodach-Baladan ran away to avoid capture. He again seized the Babylonian throne in 703 BC after Sargon's death. That's why

³⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998) 376.

Sennacherib had to go east to deal with Babylon before he could turn south to settle the Levant. Sennacherib didn't catch him, didn't kill him. Again Merodach-Baladan escaped. After that, he wasn't able to establish himself over Babylon again, but he did set himself up in his home territory of Chaldea. Sennacherib had to go out and fight him again the year after he invaded Judah. And once again, Merodach-Baladan escaped with his life, fleeing into southern Elam this time, where he died eventually before 694 BC.³⁶

So, when might emissaries have come from Merodach-Baladan? Some scholars argue the emissaries were sent during the time of Sargon, when he first proclaimed himself king of Babylon. That does not fit well with the promise of 15 more years for Hezekiah to live. What does make sense is that they came sometime between 703 BC and 700 BC, just before, during, or just after Sennacherib's invasion of Judah. I think it makes the most sense to believe the emissaries were sent just ahead of the invasion. Merodach-Baladan would have just suffered defeat from Sennacherib but he would not have given up his title as king of Babylon. He would be looking for support from other rebellious vassals to weaken Sennacherib, so that he could once again claim Babylon.

I think an emissary just before the invasion also makes good sense with the Biblical details. The enormous amount of gold and silver paid out to Sennacherib would still be part of the treasury, explaining Hezekiah's pride in showing off the wealth. Assuming the emissaries came before the invasion also matches God's word to Hezekiah in 38:6 at the time of his illness. God said to Hezekiah, "And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city." In fact, that's the strongest detail that suggests that the sickness actually happened before the events in chapters 36 and 37.

But why? Why do we have the stories in this order? If chapters 38-39 happened first, why don't they come before chapters 36-37? The answer to that question is not too complicated. Isaiah is not attempting here to write a history book. He is writing a theological work and incorporating narrative to make theological points. He is using the crisis of the invasion to end this section of six woes plus the narrative. And he is using the story of sickness and Babylonian emissaries to transition into the next major section of the book. We would not fault a preacher for using one illustration from his life to make his first point and then going backwards chronologically when using another illustration from his life to make his second point. We believe both illustrations are historically accurate. And we understand the order is dictated by the structure of the sermon, not the chronology of the illustrations. The pastor is not giving us a history of his life. He is using illustrations to make points. That's what Isaiah is doing. This is not a history book. This is a theological work that is using history to make points.

So, it is not a problem that Isaiah uses two stories from the life of Hezekiah out of order, one to end the six woes and the other to transition us into the second major part of Isaiah.

But in making that argument that Isaiah is not trying to present us with a history of Hezekiah's life, I am highlighting a problem elsewhere. Because 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles also tell the story of deliverance from Assyria before they tell the story of Hezekiah's recovery. And unlike Isaiah, both Kings and Chronicles are historical narratives. So, we do expect the events in those books to be arranged chronologically.

That brings up a further question that is too big for me to address in this lesson, and it's the question of, who wrote this text anyway? Since the text is basically identical in all three places (Kings, Chronicles, and Isaiah), we have to ask the question, "Who copied from whom?" Without getting into the details of the discussion, I'll just say I think the most likely scenario is that Kings borrowed from Isaiah, and Chronicles borrowed from Kings. I think it is less likely to expect a prophet like Isaiah to

³⁶ Editors. *Merodach-Baladan II: king of Babylonia*. (Britannica, accessed March 24, 2022) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Merodach-Baladan-II>
Caleb Howard. *Who were the Assyrians?* (Tyndale House, April 8, 2021) tyndalehouse.com/explore/articles/who-were-the-assyrians.

borrow from somewhere else. It is much more likely that he was the one others borrowed from. And that could explain why these particular stories are out of order in Kings and Chronicles. If the whole narrative was borrowed from Isaiah and incorporated into the historical record, the author who borrowed it may have left Isaiah's thematic order in place out of respect for Isaiah's word.

To sum up, the extension of 15 years granted to Hezekiah places the story of his recovery right around 701 BC. And the amount of treasure he had to show the Babylonians and the promise that God would deliver the city both suggest that the emissaries came just prior to Sennacherib's invasion of Judah.

Now let's talk about Sennacherib's invasion and the background for chapters 36-37.

Sennacherib and the Invasion of Judah

The Historical Sources

Dr Caleb Howard, a research fellow at Tyndale House, calls the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib, "the Old Testament event that is best attested, both inside and outside of the Bible."³⁷ The invasion is recounted in 2 Kings 18 and 19; 2 Chronicles 32; Isaiah 36-37; Sennacherib's Annals; and the Lachish wall reliefs that decorated Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh.

Sennacherib's annals record his various conquests and exists on many fragments. Complete records exist on three nearly identical clay prisms called, "the Taylor prism," "the Jerusalem prism," and, "the Oriental Institute prism." All three prisms were created during Sennacherib's lifetime within a decade of the invasion.

So, what is a prism? The prisms are 38 cm tall by 14 cm wide. That is pretty much the size of a 2-liter Coke bottle. So imagine a cylinder that is that height, the height of a 2-liter Coke bottle, and has the width the same as the Coke bottle at its widest point. The prisms are not circular. They are hexagonal cylinders. They have six sides. Each side contains a long paragraph of tiny cuneiform text. A hole runs through the middle of the cylinder, so it could be placed on a stand, like a paper towel stand, and so just imagine rotating a roll of paper towels, but it's hexagonal, it's not circular, it has six sides, and so you read one side and then you turn it to the next, and then you read the next side and then you keep turning it, until you get all the way around to all six sides. Here is a relevant portion from the Taylor prism,

"But as for Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not bow in submission to my yoke, forty-six of his strong walled towns and innumerable smaller villages in their neighborhood I besieged and conquered by stamping down earth-ramps and then by bringing up battering rams, by the assault of foot soldiers, by breaches, tunneling, and field operations. I made to come out from them 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, innumerable horses, mules, donkeys, camels, large and small cattle, and counted them as the spoils of war. [Hezekiah] himself I shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city [...] I fixed upon him an increase in the amount to be given as [tribute] for my lordship, in addition to the former tribute, to be given annually. As for Hezekiah, the awful splendor of my lordship overwhelmed him..."³⁸

The other major Assyrian record, the wall reliefs from Sennacherib's palace, include twelve meters of panels depicting the siege of Lachish. Isaiah 36:2 reports that Sennacherib does not come down to Jerusalem because he is held up laying siege to Lachish, the second largest city in Judah. The wall reliefs from Nineveh and the archeological site of Lachish itself provide details of the siege that Isaiah mentions.

The wall reliefs show archers, men with slings, spearmen, chariots, and siege engines on ramps leading up to the wall. A dirt siege ramp like the one depicted in the relief is still in place at the

³⁷ Caleb Howard. *Who were the Assyrians?* (Tyndale House, April 8, 2021) tyndalehouse.com/explore/articles/who-were-the-assyrians.

³⁸ Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds. *Readings from the Ancient Near East*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002) 146-147.

archaeological site of ancient Lachish. The wall reliefs also depict the horror of an Assyrian siege, showing beheadings, impalement on poles, refugees fleeing the city, and slaves being lead away in chains. The reliefs end with Sennacherib sitting on his throne as prisoners are paraded before him. An inscription declares him “king of the world.”

Dating the Fourteenth Year of King Hezekiah

The first potentially confusing historic detail occurs in the first verse of the invasion narrative. Isaiah 36:1 reports Sennacherib’s invasion as occurring in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah. We have actually already talked about what I think is the solution to this problem. This is only a problem if we fail to recognize the difference between coregency and sole regency. If Hezekiah’s coregency began in 729 - six years before the fall of Samaria - then fourteen years later would be 715 BC, and that’s not when the invasion happens. So that would be a problem. But if we count from the beginning of Hezekiah’s sole reign, instead of from the beginning of his coregency, then we start in 715 BC, the year of Ahaz’ death. Fourteen years later brings us to 701 BC, which agrees with the Assyrian annals. There is no problem.

Hezekiah’s Reforms and Defection

A second confusing detail has to do with the unfaithfulness of Hezekiah during the lead up to Sennacherib’s invasion. 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles both emphasize how good Hezekiah is, and they give us details about Hezekiah’s spiritual reforms, how he re-instituted Temple worship and destroyed idols and high places. But in the six woes, Isaiah has emphasized Judah’s defection from Yahweh. What happened? Hezekiah began very well.

Walt Kaiser comments,

As a veritable youngster, [Hezekiah] had little or no positive impact on the spiritual conditions that existed while his father ruled. But by the time he became sole ruler, he had seen and witnessed enough to have determined that things would definitely change when he came to power.³⁹

I find the story about the restoration of Passover especially interesting. Hezekiah was not content to restore Passover in Judah only. He sent messengers into the lands of the recently fallen Northern Kingdom. It could be argued that he did so for political reasons, to make steps towards unifying Israel. But the context of the report in 2 Chronicles, in the midst of wide-ranging spiritual reforms, suggests more of a sincere missionary motive. Hezekiah wanted to restore worship of Yahweh for all the tribes of Israel. Here is the report from 2 Chronicles 30:6 and 9–12.

⁶ The couriers went throughout all Israel and Judah with the letters from the hand of the king and his princes, even according to the command of the king, saying, “O sons of Israel, return to the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that He may return to those of you who escaped *and* are left from the hand of the kings of Assyria. [...] ⁹ For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your sons *will find* compassion before those who led them captive and will return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate, and will not turn *His* face away from you if you return to Him.” ¹⁰ So the couriers passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun, but they laughed them to scorn and mocked them. ¹¹ Nevertheless some men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem. ¹² The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the LORD.

I love that. Hezekiah was really trying. He was walking with God in faith. Also, aside from our focus on Hezekiah this is a really interesting text in thinking about what happened to the tribes of Israel located in the North? Assyria did exile thousands and they did bring in thousands from other people groups. And the people of the land eventually intermarried and developed their own pseudo-Mosaic religion. Over the period of 700 years they become the Samaritans of Jesus’ day. But the story is

³⁹ Kaiser, 376.

more complicated. Right after 722 and the fall of the Northern Kingdom, we see here Jews identifying as being of Ephraim, and Manasseh, and Zebulun, and Asher. So, for example, when Jesus is presented for circumcision at the Temple, we can read in Luke 2:36 of a prophetess named Anna who is of the tribe of Asher. The ten tribes of the North took a dreadful blow. But they are not completely erased from history. We have to imagine that many settled south in Judah after the devastation of the North. Hezekiah has included them in the worship of the Temple if they will come. And some did.

The early reports of Hezekiah's reign show a sincere reversal of his father Ahaz' spiritual apostasy. He encourages a denunciation of idols and a full return to Yahweh and to the Covenant of Moses. 2 Kings 18:7 reports, "And the Lord was with him; wherever he went he prospered." But our study of Isaiah 28-35 has been full of woe on Judah for not listening to God and turning, instead, to Egypt for security.

So, again we ask, what happened?

I imagine what happened is what happens to all of us. Who lives their life consistently in an attitude of faithful dependence on God? Things go great and then we take credit. Pride creeps in. What we once did with a little fear and trembling, filled with the Spirit, we now do according to our experience and skill in our own strength, and we don't even think about praying ahead of time. Or when responsibility piles on our shoulders and people are looking at us for solutions, we listen to the clamoring voices and the wisdom in our own heads instead of persevering in prayer, seeking God for guidance.

Scripture is full of sincere believers who failed at some point. Abraham lived a life of faith, and yet lied about his wife twice. Sarah lived a life of faith, and yet laughed out loud when God said she would have a son. Moses lived a life of faith, and yet bitterly struck the rock of Meribah. David lived a life of faith, and yet called Bathsheba to his home. Josiah, the last good Judean king after Hezekiah, lived a life of faith, and yet pridefully fought the Egyptians without God's guidance and died in the endeavor. Peter lived a life of faith, and yet separated himself from Gentile Christians until Paul rebuked him.

It is not hard for me to believe Hezekiah lived a life of faith, and yet gave in to his advisors' counsel to make treaty with Egypt. We don't get the full story on how this happened. But the message in Isaiah has been clear. The leaders of Judah have foolishly turned to Egypt without seeking the will of God. And Hezekiah has to be implicated, either actively or passively, he just let things unfold. But there could not have been treaty with Egypt without Hezekiah's assent.

Hezekiah's illness and recovery seem to have been a major readjustment point in his life, turning him back to the way of faith. He hadn't turned from Yahweh. We don't have to imagine him rejecting Yahweh, but you know how we can get: we believe but we become complacent. There seems to be a moment when he turns back to sincerely seeking God in a walk of faith. If it did happen just prior to the invasion, that would help explain Hezekiah's spiritual receptivity during the crisis point described by Isaiah in chapters 36-37.

The Tribute Given to Sennacherib

A third confusing detail comes from the mention of tribute Hezekiah paid. That detail is included in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Sennacherib's annals. It is not mentioned in Isaiah, which is a bit odd since the text of 2 Kings 18:13-19:37 is otherwise almost identical to Isaiah 36-37. These three verses are not in Isaiah, 2 Kings 18:14-16.

¹⁴ Then Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, "I have done wrong. Withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear." So the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. ¹⁵ Hezekiah gave *him* all the silver which was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasuries of the king's house. ¹⁶ At that time Hezekiah cut off *the gold from* the doors of the temple of the LORD, and *from* the doorposts which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria.

One very interesting thing about this Biblical report of three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold is that this is the exact same figure quoted on the Assyrian prism of Sennacherib's annals, which also declares a payment of "three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold."⁴⁰ It's an interesting corroboration of the Biblical detail.

The fact that the tribute is mentioned in Kings and Chronicles and not in Isaiah is not a problem. Isaiah focuses in on the moment of crisis in chapters 36-37. He has simply trimmed down the narrative. It is very plausible to assume there was even more interaction between Hezekiah and Sennacherib than what we get reported. Apparently, Hezekiah attempted to pay off Sennacherib after the invasion had begun. And essentially, he is saying, "Okay, okay. I give in. I submit to your rule. I will pay tribute to make up for the tribute I have not paid. I will pay even more, just withdraw."

Sennacherib takes the tribute, but does not call off the assault. We can interpret that in a couple of ways. One interpretation is that Sennacherib accepted the tribute, but with conditions too steep for Hezekiah. Hezekiah hoped all that would be exacted from him had been. But the Rabshakeh sent by Sennacherib to Jerusalem informed him that exile was still on the table. The tribute only succeeded in preventing the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of its inhabitants, but Hezekiah and his rulers would have to go.

Motyer interprets the payment of tribute differently. He concludes that Hezekiah was correct in expecting Sennacherib to pull his troops back after the tribute was received.⁴¹ Sennacherib simply decided not to honor the deal and pressed ahead with the invasion. Motyer believes this is the treachery referred to in previous verses, most recently in 33:1, the woe aimed at Assyria.

¹ Woe to you, O destroyer, while you were not destroyed; As soon as you finish destroying, you will be destroyed;	And he who is treacherous, while <i>others</i> did not deal treacherously with him. As soon as you cease to deal treacherously, <i>others</i> did deal treacherously with you.
---	---

Motyer believes Sennacherib exemplified treachery by accepting the tribute from Hezekiah and yet still continuing the invasion.

For Isaiah there is no problem not mentioning the tribute. He has simply shortened the narrative to focus on the point that God delivered Jerusalem.

The Battle with Egypt at Eltekeh

A final confusing detail concerns the reference to Cush in Isaiah 37:9. That verse informs us that Sennacherib was drawn away from Lachish to fight Tirhakah of Cush. The Kings of Cush reign over Egypt in this period, so that's the same as saying Sennacherib was drawn away to face Egypt. Tirhakah is not yet king at this time, but he is old enough to lead an army, so he could have been there. The text may be giving him his future title as was custom in the ancient Near East.⁴²

Assyrian records speak of a battle against Egyptian and Judean forces at a site called, "Eltekeh." The location is not known. The battle of Eltekeh may have happened before Sennacherib's forces entered Judah and was not decisive, allowing for this later battle during the siege of Lachish. Or this reference in Isaiah 37:9 could be the battle of Eltekeh. We don't have enough information to go on.

Conclusion

This is where Sennacherib's annals end. He gives no mention to defeat in Judah, which is not unusual, since his annals do not mention any defeat anywhere. He does not explain why he never attacked

⁴⁰ Arnold and Beyer, 147.

⁴¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 276.

⁴² J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 1-39*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 649.

Jerusalem. He says Hezekiah yielded to his splendor, asked to be a vassal, sent tribute. But Sennacherib never brought an army into the region again.

What happened? Why didn't he continue the invasion on to Jerusalem? The Greek historian Herodotus, writing in his "*Histories*" about 250 years after the fact, describes something that happened to the Assyrian army the night before engaging the Egyptians, "During the night [the Assyrians] were overrun by a horde of field mice that gnawed quivers and bows and the handles of shields, with the result that many were killed fleeing unarmed the next day."⁴³ Scholars don't know exactly what to make of the invasion of the field mice. One suggestion is that the reference to mice could be a garbled allusion to a plague among the Assyrians.

Isaiah reports in 37:36, "Then the angel of the Lord went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead." Oswalt comments, "As to the terrific losses involved, which Walter Kaiser says are, frankly, impossible Smith notes that the Third Crusade mounted over a million and a half men and that the losses of the First Crusade have been estimated at more than 300,000. Perhaps more to the point, H. W. F. Saggs, on the basis of Assyrian reports, concludes that the Assyrian "Grand Army" must have numbered in the hundreds of thousands."⁴⁴ It is historically plausible that the Assyrian army that invaded Judah numbered more than 185,000 men. That 185,000 men suddenly died in the night, well that is hard to believe. Not only is it hard to believe, it is practically impossible to believe. Unless the hand of God struck them down. And that is exactly Isaiah's point. This is a miracle on the level of the Egyptian army being swallowed up in the Red Sea. God is the Lord of History.

In the final two verses of chapter 37, we get a report of Sennacherib's death. This is Isaiah 37:37-38,

³⁷ So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned *home* and lived at Nineveh. ³⁸ It came about as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons killed him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son became king in his place.

The time frame from verse 37, when Sennacherib returned home after the invasion of Judah, to the moment of his death in verse 38 was actually 20 years. That's a big gap between verses. Sennacherib died in 681 BC, five years after Hezekiah. And that may suggest that Isaiah may have produced the final, completed version of his work during the reign of Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah. It is also possible that a disciple of Isaiah added just this verse 38 after Isaiah's death to record here the judgment of God on Sennacherib. But we do not know when Isaiah died. He could have written this detail himself. 681 BC is not too late. The murder of Sennacherib by his sons agrees with the Assyrian annals, which affirm Esarhaddon as the son who followed Sennacherib as king.

Isaiah just gives us this quick summary here because he is not interested in giving us a history of Sennacherib's life. Sennacherib boasted of his supremacy as he came against Hezekiah, son of David. He mocked Yahweh. Then his army was destroyed, and he was turned back home, and he later died at the hands of his sons. A silent blank was left in his annals concerning Jerusalem. He did not fulfill his boasts. That's because Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, is the only true, sovereign Lord of History.

⁴³ A. D. Godley, Ed. *Herodotus, The Histories 2.141* (Perseus, accessed March 24, 2022)

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hdt.+2.141&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126>

⁴⁴ Oswalt, 669–670.

Lesson 18 Isaiah 36-37 Lord of History

Introduction

Sennacherib has invaded Judah, capturing 46 fortified towns, killing soldiers, destroying fields, seizing livestock, and taking captive Jews as slaves into exile. He has scoured the land. And he is coming to Jerusalem. Isaiah foretold devastation in the six woes that precede the narrative of invasion. Here is a sample from the first woe, Isaiah 28:14-18 and 22.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>¹⁴ Therefore, hear the word of the LORD,
Who rule this people</p> <p>¹⁵ Because you have said, "We have made a
covenant with death,
The overwhelming scourge will not reach us
when it passes by,</p> <p>¹⁶ Therefore thus says the Lord God,</p> | <p>O scoffers,
who are in Jerusalem,
And with Sheol we have made a pact.</p> <p>For we have made falsehood our refuge and we
have concealed ourselves with deception."
"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a tested stone,
A costly cornerstone <i>for</i> the foundation, firmly placed.</p> | <p>He who believes <i>in it</i> will not be disturbed.</p> |
|---|---|--|

A cornerstone for the foundation of Zion. That's an interesting image. God lays in Zion a stone for the foundation of Zion. A cornerstone is not something you lay in an already completed building. This is either a new temple or palace, or the start of a wholly new Zion. Isaiah has been preaching a new Zion. The present Zion only foreshadows the glorified Zion that is to come. This cornerstone is to be laid in advance. It is a faith test. Those who do not believe will stumble. Those who do believe will not be disturbed or harried. They will rest in the security of God.

For Hezekiah, faith in God to save requires accepting the truth that he is not the savior. He is not the cornerstone of a new society. In chapter 7, Isaiah prophesied to Hezekiah's father that a child of promise would be born. And before that child was old enough to know good from evil, Judah would be saved from the double threat of Syria and Israel. Was Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, that child?

In chapter 9, Isaiah prophesied the birth of a child who would sit "on the throne of David and over his kingdom. To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore." Hezekiah was the next king after Ahaz to sit on the throne of David. Then in chapter 11, "a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding of counsel and strength." When sole rule over Judah fell to Hezekiah, he immediately began to reform the nation. He cleansed the Temple. He tore down places of idol worship. He re-instituted Passover, even sending messengers into the Assyrian-held territory of the north to invite all the tribes of Israel to attend. He was led by the Spirit of God. He acted with wisdom, and counsel, and strength.

Is Hezekiah the son of David foretold who would restore Zion? Is he the cornerstone laid in Jerusalem? No. Not any more than Peter is the rock upon which the Church of God is built. Peter was the rock only in the sense that he proclaimed the essential Gospel message concerning Jesus. In another sense, the Gospel message is the rock on which the Church is built. But only because the Gospel message rightly establishes the truth about Jesus Christ, who is fundamentally the rock, the foundation.

There is a connection between messenger, message, and Messiah that allows us to consider all three as contributing to the laying of the foundation. At the same time, we clearly see which of those three is the foundation. Jesus Christ, Messiah, Divine Son of David, He is the rock. He is the cornerstone that must be laid in Zion.

Hezekiah is not the cornerstone. He foreshadows the cornerstone. He gives witness to the cornerstone. He is not the cornerstone. A message of salvation has come to Hezekiah through Isaiah. Jerusalem and the throne of David will be protected by God. Isaiah has given witness to the coming king on whose shoulders government will rest eternally. In the time of Hezekiah, the actual

cornerstone has not yet been laid in Jerusalem. The Messiah has not yet come. But the message of the cornerstone has been set down by God through Isaiah. It is a standard, a banner. That message now constitutes a faith test, or faith challenge for Hezekiah. Can he accept that he is not the salvation of Israel? He is son of David. He is king. But he is but a man. He can seek to reform Israel. He cannot save Israel. He cannot save himself. Will he accept his weakness, his mistaken trust in Egypt, his need for God? And will he turn in faith, believing in the salvation of God?

Isaiah's narrative in chapters 36-37 gives a historical example of God as the Lord of History. Hezekiah plays the same role as his father Ahaz played: he is the human leader who must make a choice. Will he place his faith in God as the Lord of History, or will he turn elsewhere for salvation?

The narrative has two main sections: two emissaries from Sennacherib, and then a brief summary conclusion that consists of only three verses. The two emissaries share a similar pattern of three parts each. First, Sennacherib communicates his word to Hezekiah. Second, Hezekiah responds. And third, God communicates His word to Hezekiah. Neither Sennacherib nor God communicate directly to Hezekiah. Sennacherib and God are engaged in a power encounter over the vassal Hezekiah. According to the pattern of Ancient Near Eastern Kings, they both use mediators. Sennacherib will speak through his field commander, the Rabshakeh; Yahweh will speak through his prophet Isaiah. Hezekiah will be caught in the middle, forced to choose between one or the other.

I. Sennacherib's Word to Hezekiah through a Mediator 36:1-37:7

A. The Rabshakeh's Message (36:1-21)

The first word to Hezekiah is delivered by the Rabshakeh. Bibles tend to follow the older view that Rabshakeh was a name. Scholars now believe Rabshakeh is a title meaning, "field commander." The Rabshakeh delivers his message in two parts: first to Hezekiah's officials in front of the walls of Jerusalem, and then to the soldiers and citizens on those walls. We will start with the message directed to Hezekiah's officials in Isaiah 36:1-10.

1. The Message to Hezekiah's Officials (1-10)

¹ Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them. ² And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a large army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field. ³ Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came out to him. ⁴ Then Rabshakeh said to them, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, "What is this confidence that you have? ⁵ "I say, 'Your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.' Now on whom do you rely, that you have rebelled against me? ⁶ "Behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, *even* on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. ⁷ "But if you say to me, 'We trust in the LORD our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'? ⁸ "Now therefore, come make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. ⁹ "How then can you repulse one official of the least of my master's servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰ "Have I now come up without the LORD's approval against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.' "

This is the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah. Dating from the beginning of his sole rule in 715 BC, fourteen years later agrees with the Assyrian records that Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 BC. The great wall relief in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh shows the siege of Lachish. Sennacherib paused his advance to deal with Lachish, the second largest city of Judah, before attacking Jerusalem. This would secure supply lines and the flank of his army. While besieging Lachish, Sennacherib sent his field commander, the Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem with a large army. For Assyria, that secondary army could have easily been 50,000 men. The Rabshakeh first sought to secure a surrender. We can

assume he is also there to guard the city, so that no help could come to Lachish from Jerusalem and no escape could be made by Hezekiah.

Hezekiah's officials Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah came out to parley with the Rabshakeh. We heard of Shebna first in Isaiah 22:15. He was a leader focused on his own interests, more concerned with his legacy than the condition of the nation. In Isaiah 22:20 it was prophesied that he would lose his position as steward to Eliakim. That prophecy has been fulfilled. Here, we see Eliakim come out as the steward and Shebna as the scribe.

There is this other detail that stands out because it seems so unimportant. Why mention the detail that Rabshakeh "stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field"? Why go into detail about that place, that one detail, when there is so much other detail that Isaiah does not tell us? Well, the place has historic significance and it did not go unnoticed by Isaiah.

We read back in 7:3-4,

Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field, and say to him, 'Take care and be calm, have no fear...'

The same place Ahaz had stood now the Rabshakeh stands. Ahaz did not seek out the Lord. He did not seek out Isaiah. Isaiah was sent to him. After that, Ahaz failed the faith test he was given. So the reference to the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field" takes us back to Ahaz and his story. And that narrative forces us to ask, "How about Ahaz's son? How about Hezekiah? Will he follow in the footsteps of his father, or will he trust God?"

Okay, we have got the context set up. The Rabshakeh with his army is standing outside the walls of Jerusalem. And then, he gives a message to Hezekiah's officials.

⁴ Then Rabshakeh said to them, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, "What is this confidence that you have? ⁵ I say, 'Your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.'""

"Counsel and strength," that's interesting word choice. I just noted from chapter 11 that the root of Jesse, the Messiah, would come with a spirit of counsel and strength – same words. That counsel and strength is available to all the sons of David who rely on the Lord. Sennacherib derides any counsel Hezekiah may have received, whether from Egypt or from Yahweh. According to Sennacherib, any counsel to resist is empty. The Rabshakeh's message first mocks reliance on Egypt. Verse 6.

Behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, *even* on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him.

That reference to a crushed reed, those are the reeds by the Nile. So Egypt is as flimsy as one of the reeds. In fact, if you rely on it, it's going to damage you. It will be like sticking your hand down on that reed, and yet it will pierce your hand. It's annoying, it's minor, it's no help. That's what the king of Egypt is like. That part of Sennacherib's message actually agrees with Isaiah. Egypt is false security. Egypt is going to lose to Sennacherib at battle of Eltekeh, which may have already taken place or may be referred to in the chapter 37. We are not exactly sure when that battle took place. Sennacherib is not worried about Egypt. That is all he has to say about Egypt. His main target is Yahweh. That is the trust he wants his message to undermine. Verse 7,

But if you say to me, 'We trust in the LORD our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'?

That's clever. The Rabshakeh connects the idols and high places of Judah with Yahweh in a way that makes complete sense to anyone living in the Ancient Near East and would have made sense even to a lot of Jews who were not so firm in their own Biblical theology. In the Ancient Near East, every people had a main god who ruled over a pantheon of gods. And all of the gods were manifested on earth in the form of physical idols. The first of the ten commandments declares, "You will have no

gods before me.” Certainly, that means we believe God is the one and only God. But it also targets the idea of pantheon. The main God usually has a host of lesser gods arranged before him at his court. The phrase, “No gods before me,” rejects the idea that God sits as ruling god among a host of lesser gods. The destruction of all the high places of Judah, in the mind of the Ancient Near East, can easily be interpreted as the destruction of Yahweh’s pantheon, and thus an attack on Yahweh.

The second of the ten commandments “You shall not make yourselves an idol” rejects both the making of idols of other gods and the making of an idol that is supposed to be Yahweh. Some of the idols Hezekiah destroyed may very well have been idols of Yahweh, like the golden calf was. The Rabshakeh speaks quite craftily into a culturally confused vision of who Yahweh is. He is speaking according to the generally accepted worldview of the times. It makes no sense that there is only one altar: just the altar at the Temple, where we must worship. Why can’t we worship God everywhere? Aren’t these idols also Yahweh? He is not telling the people of Judah that Yahweh is no god at all. He acknowledges Yahweh as the ruling god of the nation. The way he attacks their sense of assurance is by telling them Hezekiah has insulted Yahweh by removing Yahweh’s high places and idols. He is telling them Hezekiah’s religious reforms are nothing to depend on. Don’t think you have made Yahweh happy. In your zeal you’ve misunderstood your own Scriptures. You have insulted Yahweh.

That’s a challenge we hear in our own day. Some people want to reject God and Jesus altogether, sure. Others want to undermine the Biblical vision of God and Jesus. They will say things like, “You have to grow with the times. The Bible is inspired by human beings in their own culture but it doesn’t hold the same weight for us today. We know God is not a God of wrath. He is a God of love. He would never send His own Son to the cross. That’s angry. And Jesus would never judge. Biblical morality is also outdated. That’s not what God wants for us. Your pursuit of an overly Biblical Christianity is backward, and you’re actually setting yourself up against Jesus.” That’s the kind of twisting the Rabshakeh is engaged in. And the people of Judah have not shown themselves to be solid or strong theologically. So his words have an inroad. He wants to undermine, not the existence of Yahweh, but their vision of Yahweh and their trust in His word. “I mean, who really is Yahweh?”

Having attempted to undermine trust in God, the Rabshakeh takes it a step further claiming that he, in fact, is the one doing the will of God. Verses 8-10.

⁸ “Now therefore, come make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. ⁹ How then can you repulse one official of the least of my master’s servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰ Have I now come up without the LORD’s approval against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, ‘Go up against this land and destroy it.’”

That’s not completely wrong. God has sent Assyria to judge Judah for its faithlessness. But the Rabshakeh does not really believe that and he has in no way submitted himself to Yahweh. Centuries later, the Mongolian lord Genghis Khan made the same claim as he destroyed Muslim cities on his way to Europe. “You have sinned against Allah. How else could I have defeated you? Allah must desire your punishment. He has given you into my hands.” The Khan was using their own theology and turning it on top of them. He did not really believe it. But he knew it would work on the minds of the Muslims he had defeated. The Rabshakeh is using the theology of the day against the Jews. “How else could Sennacherib’s armies win? Yahweh must be against us and for them.” His words are very unsettling. You don’t know whether you have believed truthfully about Yahweh or not. And even if you have, maybe this is just the will of God? Maybe Isaiah is wrong? God doesn’t want to save us: we deserve this.

2. The Message to the Inhabitants of Jerusalem (11-21)

Hezekiah’s officials are rightly nervous about the effect these words might have on the soldiers and citizens defending this part of Jerusalem.

¹¹ Then Eliakim and Shebna and Joah said to Rabshakeh, “Speak now to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand *it*; and do not speak with us in Judean in the hearing of the people who are on the wall.”

The Rabshakeh apparently knew Hebrew, even the specific dialect – Judean - and had been speaking loudly enough for people to overhear him. Aramaic was the trade language of the Assyrian Empire. It would become the language of Israel after the Babylonian exile, but was not at this time. The Judean officials want to minimize who might understand the Rabshakeh’s message, so as not to weaken moral any further . But that’s exactly what the Rabshakeh wants. So, he continues on with Hebrew, speaking loudly to the men on the walls, and elevating his trash talk as he continues. This is 36:12-21, the message to the people of Jerusalem.

¹² But Rabshakeh said, “Has my master sent me only to your master and to you to speak these words, *and* not to the men who sit on the wall, *doomed* to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you?” ¹³ Then Rabshakeh stood and cried with a loud voice in Judean and said, “Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. ¹⁴ “Thus says the king, ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you; ¹⁵ nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD, saying, “The LORD will surely deliver us, this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.” ¹⁶ ‘Do not listen to Hezekiah,’ for thus says the king of Assyria, ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, ¹⁷ until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. ¹⁸ ‘Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you, saying, “The LORD will deliver us.” Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹ ‘Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? And when have they delivered Samaria from my hand? ²⁰ ‘Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the LORD would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?’ ”²¹ But they were silent and answered him not a word; for the king’s commandment was, “Do not answer him.”

Did you hear what the great king Sennacherib offers?

¹⁶ ‘Do not listen to Hezekiah,’ for thus says the king of Assyria, ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, ¹⁷ until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

The people who have closed themselves up in Jerusalem can return to their homes. If they make peace, they are free to enjoy their own vineyards and fig trees. Free, while Sennacherib completes the siege of Lachish and organizes the exile. They will have to say goodbye to their homes. But all is not lost. Just as Yahweh long ago granted to Israel a land of milk and honey, so also their new overlord Sennacherib promises a good land of vineyards and bread.

He continued to undermine their hope. He had already mocked their trust in Egypt and he had already claimed that Hezekiah’s reforms angered God. Here, he emphasizes Assyria’s power proven by victory over Judah’s northern neighbors. The list moves in a north-to-south direction, starting with the Syrian city-state Hamath. Hamath fell. Arpad fell. Sepharvaim fell. Samaria fell. The fall of each state implies the defeat of each state’s god.

Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? [...] Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the LORD would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?

That’s not only a challenge against Hezekiah, the son of David. The Rabshakeh has just crossed a line. Sennacherib is greater than the Holy One of Israel.

How will Hezekiah respond? Let’s read it, 36:22-37:4,

B. Hezekiah Responds (36:22-37:4)

²² Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn and told him the words of Rabshakeh. ¹ And when King Hezekiah heard *it*, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and entered the house of the LORD. ² Then he sent Eliakim who was over the household with Shebna the scribe and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz. ³ They said to him, “Thus says Hezekiah, ‘This day is a day of distress, rebuke and rejection;

for children have come to birth, and there is no strength to deliver.

⁴ ‘Perhaps the LORD your God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to reproach the living God, and will rebuke the words which the LORD your God has heard. Therefore, offer a prayer for the remnant that is left.’ ”

It’s a day of distress, rebuke, and rejection. Hezekiah is at the bottom of a pit. Everybody is. They are all wearing sackcloth. They are in mourning. Hezekiah uses the image of death in childbirth to describe his feeling of helplessness he has. “For children have come to birth and there is no strength to deliver.” It’s hard to think of a more personally tragic moment than the almost birth of a child, a child dying because the midwife, or doctor, or mother could not overcome the complication in delivery. And that’s how Hezekiah feels. Jerusalem is his child and he can’t save it. He is hopeless.

He is broken. He is afraid. He realizes his own impotence. Hezekiah’s father Ahaz never sought God, never reached out to Isaiah. Hezekiah, on the other hand, where does he go? He goes into the Temple. He goes before God. And he sends word to Isaiah and asks him to pray for the remnant of Judah that still exists in Jerusalem.

Isaiah, acting as mediator between Hezekiah and Yahweh, sends a word back to Hezekiah from God. Isaiah 37:5-7.

C. The Lord’s Word to Hezekiah through Isaiah (37:5-7)

⁵ So the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah. ⁶ Isaiah said to them, “Thus you shall say to your master, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. ⁷ Behold, I will put a spirit in him so that he will hear a rumor and return to his own land. And I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.’””

The message from Isaiah is strikingly similar to the message he gave Ahaz a generation earlier. “Do not be afraid.” Sennacherib will leave. He will fall by the sword in his own land. The first part of that prophecy will come true very soon. The second part of that prophecy will come true, but not for another 20 years, when Sennacherib is killed by his own sons.

That’s the promise from Isaiah. What will Hezekiah do with that promise? He recognizes his own inability to save the people of Jerusalem. He has been humiliated and broken. But will he now trust?

The second message from Sennacherib comes in the form of a written message. We will see the same pattern as before. Sennacherib will speak. Hezekiah will respond. God will speak. We start with Sennacherib’s message in 37:8-13.

II. Sennacherib’s Word to Hezekiah through a Written Message (37:8-38)

A. Sennacherib’s Written Message (37:8-13)

⁸ Then Rabshakeh returned and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah, for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. ⁹ When he heard *them* say concerning Tirhakah king of Cush, “He has come out to fight against you,” and when he heard *it* he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, ¹⁰ “Thus you shall say to Hezekiah king of Judah, ‘Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you, saying, “Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.”

¹¹ ‘Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the lands, destroying them completely. So will you be spared? ¹² ‘Did the gods of those nations which my fathers have

destroyed deliver them, *even* Gozan and Haran and Rezep and the sons of Eden who *were* in Telassar? ¹³ ‘Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, *and of Hena and Ivvah?*’ ”

The Rabshakeh heard that Sennacherib left the siege of Lachish to confront Tirhakah the king of Cush. The rulers of Cush conquered Egypt, unifying the Nile River valley. Tirhakah will be the last of the Black Pharaohs of Cush. So this reference to Cush is the same thing as reference to Egypt at this point. Tirhakah’s brother Shebitku was king at the time of this invasion. Tirhakah, apparently, led an army that now threatens Assyrian forces. The reference to him as king fits with the custom of giving him the title he would have had when Isaiah wrote down the narrative. The town of Libnah is not known, but that is where Sennacherib has moved his forces, and that is what keeps him from coming to Jerusalem himself.

In light of this further delay, before Sennacherib can march on Jerusalem, he has a message sent to Hezekiah, reinforcing his earlier message. The written letter expands on the last point in the previous message. Assyria has defeated everyone they ever faced. Why would Hezekiah think Judah is any different? And this time Sennacherib mentions minor Mesopotamian kingdoms he had suppressed: Gozan, Haran, Rezep, and Telassar. And he re-emphasizes his previous theological point: Yahweh is a regional god no stronger than the gods of these vassal states.

Verse 13 is targeted directly at Hezekiah as king. Sennacherib asks, “Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, *and of Hena and Ivvah?*” Where are these Syrian kings, Hezekiah? Impaled, flayed, beheaded. Kings come to a bad end when they rebel against Sennacherib, the self-styled king of the world.

How will Hezekiah respond to that? Isaiah 37:14-20.

B. Hezekiah Responds (37:14-20)

¹⁴ Then Hezekiah took the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it, and he went up to the house of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. ¹⁵ Hezekiah prayed to the LORD saying, ¹⁶ “O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned *above* the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷ Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of Sennacherib, who sent *them* to reproach the living God. ¹⁸ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated all the countries and their lands, ¹⁹ and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. ²⁰ Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God.”

It’s a powerful scene. Hezekiah takes the letter from the hand of the messengers, and he takes it into the House of the Lord, and he spreads it out before the Lord. It’s a very visual, concrete way of laying his problem down before God. And this time we don’t see Hezekiah sending word asking Isaiah to pray. This time Hezekiah prays himself. He has been broken. And now, he shows his belief. This is a prayer of faith. And in it, he follows the Biblical example of men like Abraham and Moses and David, men who had a true heart for the Lord, by grounding his request in the desire for God’s glory. “Sennacherib has reproached you, God. Deliver us, Lord, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are God.”

Interestingly, in the prayer Hezekiah recognizes spiritual beings in Heaven. There is a host that surrounds Yahweh, though not a host of lesser gods. Hezekiah knows his Biblical theology. It is a host of created beings that help us imagine the power of God. He is enthroned above a heavenly army of cherubim that He can send in to battle anytime He desires.

Hezekiah goes on to reject the assumption that ancient battle is battle between the gods of two nations. “You are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth.” There is one God, and He is sovereign over all nations. He is creator. “You have made heaven and earth.”

Hezekiah then calls God's attention to the blasphemous proclamation of Sennacherib.

Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of Sennacherib, who sent *them* to reproach the living God.

There is some irony here. In general, Judah has failed to hear and see who God truly is. Though, in this moment we're seeing that Hezekiah sees. And in his seeing, he is asking God to hear and see who Sennacherib truly is.

I love the next part. Hezekiah has heard the theological message of Sennacherib and rejected the fundamental assumptions of that message. Sennacherib claims that his victory over the nations is a spiritual victory over the gods of those nations. Hezekiah is not confused by that twisting of the truth. He stands firm on his Biblical convictions. He believes the Old Testament word that he has been taught. And because he has believed the Biblical word, he is able to refute the false message of Sennacherib as he prays. Verses 18-19.

¹⁸ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated all the countries and their lands, ¹⁹ and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them.

Sennacherib has not defeated the gods of the nations, because those gods are not gods. Hezekiah ends with a request for God's glory to be displayed through victory.

²⁰ Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God."

Could that be a bit of manipulation on Hezekiah's part? He really just wants to save himself, right? So, he frames his prayer as though all he wants is to see God glorified. We all know how to make our prayers sound appropriately spiritual and selfless. "I just want this for you, God, not for me. I just want it for you." Is that what Hezekiah is doing?

No. Of course, there is desire for himself mixed in there. There always is. Of course, he wants to see his family safe. He wants his city to go undamaged. He wants his nation to survive and recover. But a true believer can also come to the point where he or she sees things as God sees things. Hezekiah's eyes have been opened. He realizes that it really is more about God than it is about himself. The throne of David is God's. Jerusalem is God's. The Israelites are God's. God's glory is at stake. Hezekiah has been broken. And he is able to lift up his eyes from his own circumstances to see his God and King.

How do we know this is sincere? The way we usually do in the Bible. We see the heart of a person in the way God responds to that person. God sees into Hezekiah's heart. And he accepts Hezekiah's prayer.

We again get the Lord responds to Hezekiah delivered through Isaiah. The response is in three parts: a short word to Hezekiah, a longer word to Sennacherib, and then another short word to Hezekiah. The first part to Hezekiah is just two verses. Isaiah 37:21-22.

C. The Lord's Word to Hezekiah through Isaiah (37:21-35)

1. The Word to Hezekiah (21-22a)

²¹ Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent *word* to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, ²² this is the word that the LORD has spoken against him:'"

There is one key phrase here. "Because you have prayed to me about Sennacherib." Hezekiah's expression of faith through prayer made a difference. God will always carry out His promises. We don't defeat God's promises. At the same time, there is room for our response to also bring about an effect. Back in chapter 7, God promised Ahaz he would save Judah from Syria and Israel. Ahaz responded by being spiritually dismissive of Isaiah and seeking security in Assyria. God kept the promise of deliverance that He had already made. But in response to Ahaz' lack of faith and idolatry,

God also permitted Assyria's king Tiglath-Pileser to partially invade Judah. Ahaz' faithlessness brought about consequences.

In these current circumstances, God has already promised through Isaiah that Judah will be delivered from Assyria. Even so, like with Ahaz, there may have been an "option A" fulfillment of promised deliverance based on a positive faith response from Hezekiah, and an "option B" fulfillment of promised deliverance based on a lack of faith from Hezekiah. God's sovereign promises are always kept. And our behavior has consequences. Both of those truths apply. Even when God is keeping His promises, there is still room for further consequences, whether good, based on our faithfulness; or bad based, on our unfaithfulness. In this case, God has promised to save. That's going to happen. And Hezekiah's faith contributes to how that salvation will be realized.

So, God says, "Because you prayed, I now have a word for Sennacherib." And that is recorded in 37:22b-29. It is in poetic verse.

2. *The Word to Sennacherib (22b-29)*

The first verse is going to turn Sennacherib's trash talk back against him. Sennacherib sent his messages to Jerusalem, like a rapist standing outside a home, mocking the father of the house, threatening his daughter. That is a strong image, but that is the image of war and devastation. Sennacherib boasts in his own power to knock down the door, and come in, and do whatever he wants. But when the day dawns, the virgin daughter is going mock this strong king. This is verse 22b,

She has despised you and mocked you,	The virgin daughter of Zion;
She has shaken <i>her</i> head behind you,	The daughter of Jerusalem!

The next verse questions who Sennacherib was really mocking.

²³ Whom have you reproached and blasphemed? And haughtily lifted up your eyes?	And against whom have you raised <i>your</i> voice Against the Holy One of Israel!
--	---

Lifting up and being lowered down is a regular theme in Isaiah. It never turns out well for the human being who lifts himself up. Sennacherib has lifted his eyes against the Holy One of Israel, as though a man could claim equal status with God. This is the Holy One of Israel. Remember Isaiah's vision from chapter 6: His glory fills the earth.

God takes Sennacherib's threat as a direct challenge to Himself. Verses 24-25 sound like boasts from Sennacherib that come out of his own royal annals.

²⁴ Through your servants you have reproached the Lord, I came up to the heights of the mountains, And I cut down its tall cedars <i>and</i> its choice cypresses.	And you have said, 'With my many chariots To the remotest parts of Lebanon; And I will go to its highest peak, its thickest forest.
²⁵ "It is I who dug and drunk And with the sole of my feet I dried up	The waters of foreigners, All the rivers of Egypt.'

In his pride Sennacherib has misunderstood how these human events were truly allowed to unfold. He takes all the credit. He believes it's all his power. Sennacherib could have fallen at any time like any other king and any other man. A stray arrow could have caught him. He could have fallen sick. He could have fallen of his chariot. A rainstorm could have stuck his armies in the mud. His victories happened because God permitted them to happen for the working out of His own sovereign plans. That is what God says in 26-27,

²⁶ Have you not heard? Long ago I did it, Now I have brought it to pass,	From ancient times I planned it. That you should turn fortified cities into ruinous heaps.
²⁷ Therefore their inhabitants were short of strength, They were <i>as</i> the vegetation of the field As grass on the housetops is scorched	They were dismayed and put to shame; and <i>as</i> the green herb, before it is grown up.

The reason you were strong and your enemies were weak, Sennacherib, is because I, the Lord, decreed it. Sennacherib has failed to know God. God know Sennacherib. Verses 28-29,

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>²⁸ But I know your sitting down and your going out
and your coming in</p> <p>²⁹ Because of your raging against Me</p> <p>Therefore I will put My hook in your nose
And I will turn you back by the way</p> | <p>And your raging against Me.</p> <p>And because your arrogance has come up to
My ears,
And My bridle in your lips,
which you came.</p> |
|---|--|

There is an artful turn in verse 28. The first verset, “I know your sitting down and your going out and your coming in.” It’s like speaking to a rebellious child. “I know when you leave the house. I hear you creeping back up the stairs. And I also know what you say about me when you’re not here.” That’s the next verset, “And your raging against Me.” There is no secret that God does not know. Sennacherib has lifted haughty eyes and mocked the Holy One of Israel. God will put a hook in his nose, like one who has no more sense than a beast of burden. God has no problem controlling him. With a hook in the nose, he will be turned around and sent back home in shame. There will be no boast in Sennacherib’s annals about a conquest of Jerusalem. That’s God’s word to Sennacherib. He has one more word for Hezekiah, 37:30-35.

3. The Word to Hezekiah (30-35)

³⁰ Then this shall be the sign for you: you will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what springs from the same, and in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ³¹ The surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward. ³² For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this. ³³ Therefore, thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, ‘He will not come to this city or shoot an arrow there; and he will not come before it with a shield, or throw up a siege ramp against it. ³⁴ By the way that he came, by the same he will return, and he will not come to this city,’ declares the LORD. ³⁵ ‘For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.’

God has a plan for the Messianic throne. The word, “sign,” in verse 30 is significant, but I’m going to talk about that in the next lesson. The land has been scoured by Sennacherib. It will take time to recover. This year they must eat whatever comes up. And next year, too, since they will not fully recover in time to plant their fields. But in the third year they will sow and harvest. That is a promise of recovery and also of security. You have to be secure to recover. God is going to keep Judah safe as they replant and rebuild.

Sennacherib boasts in his annals that he carried into exile 200,000 Judeans. That’s why verse 32 speaks of a remnant coming out of Jerusalem. The land has been devastated. Many have been taken away. But those who sought safety behind Jerusalem’s walls will come out again. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. That’s the second time we have heard that phrase in Isaiah, “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.” The first time was in 9:7 concerning the child who would be born to establish the kingdom of David, who would be of the throne of David and would be Mighty God. There will be no end to the increase of His government. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

Remember this, people of Jerusalem! God declared ahead of time through His prophet Isaiah that He would save you from Sennacherib. Did that come true? Yes, it did. You know it did. You lived through it. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts accomplished it. God has also declared ahead of time, through His prophet Isaiah, that a divine son of David will establish His Kingdom and eventually reign over a renewed Zion. He will be the stone laid in Zion. He is the costly cornerstone. Do you believe? Just as the zeal of the Lord turned away the mightiest army ever seen on Earth up to this point, just as you saw that in your generation; even more wonderfully, the zeal of the Lord will establish for His people a new kind of Kingdom governed by a new kind of King. Do you believe this?

III. God's Triumph over Sennacherib (37:36-38)

We conclude with the third and final part of the narrative. Just three verses. This is God's triumph over Sennacherib. Isaiah 37:36-38.

³⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead. ³⁷ So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned *home* and lived at Nineveh. ³⁸ It came about as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons killed him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son became king in his place.

God said Sennacherib would be turned back, but not by the sword of man. 185,000 died over night. Sennacherib's annals boast that he captured 46 walled cities in Judah and took away an enormous amount of plunder, people, animals, gold, and silver. But he never mentions Jerusalem. On that point he is silent. He is silent about Jerusalem because God put a hook in his nose, and turned him around, and sent him back on the way he had come. Twenty years later, his own sons assassinated him. He died just like any other man.

Lesson 19 Isaiah 38-39 Hezekiah's Fateful Choice

Introduction

What's going on with Hezekiah? Why is this story here? It is an intriguing narrative. Hezekiah, the good king, a son of David, displays some very human emotions and behaviors.

You can approach any Biblical narrative from three different perspectives. You can focus on the human experience. You can focus on the theological truths. Or you can focus on the literary significance. That's the wonderful depth of, sometimes deceptively, simple-looking Biblical narrative. All three of those perspectives stand out in this Hezekiah narrative. We can consider what we learn from Hezekiah the man: through his sickness, through his healing and through his interaction with the Babylonian emissaries. That's looking from the perspective of human experience. We can also consider what theological truths Isaiah wants to teach us through this particular story, truths about the nature of man and the sovereignty of God. That's the theological perspective. And we can ask, why this story in this particular place in this piece of literature? That's the literary perspective. It helps us recognize the art of the Bible, while also making sure we are following the author's lead in our interpretation of the other two perspectives of human experience and theological truth.

The Human Experience Angle

From the human experience angle, the contrast in this narrative with the previous narrative is one of the things that makes it so intriguing. Hezekiah is called a "good king" in the Biblical "Book of Kings." But it is never that simple. Human beings are never always good. Human beings are flawed. We don't want to whitewash Hezekiah in our interpretation. Isaiah certainly doesn't. There are going to be things in this narrative that don't sound right. We should think maybe that's the point. Hezekiah, though good, could never be the Messiah. We need a new kind of king. A king who can overcome the fallenness of humanity.

The Theological Truth Angle

The inadequacy of human kingship that comes out by looking at Hezekiah's personal experience is one of the major theological themes in this first major section of Isaiah that I have been calling, "The Book of the King." chapters 1-39. God's people are called to be righteous, but they cannot be righteous. They need a new kind of society led by a new kind of King. But no human king can fit the bill. God will judge humankind for wickedness and sin. And yet, God still offers a hope of salvation that comes through a son of David.

The Literary Significance Angle

From the literary perspective we have to ask, what's the relationship between the narrative about Hezekiah in 36-37, and our narrative of Hezekiah in 38-39? This narrative in chapters 36-37 would be a great place to end the Book of the King. We see the sovereignty of God. We see the inadequacy of Hezekiah. He is not the promised child from chapter 7. We shouldn't look to Hezekiah for salvation. But we should want to be like the Hezekiah, at least the Hezekiah in these chapters, you know, even while we look ahead to a more excellent new kind of king who will lead us into a new kind of society. We could end here. And maybe that is Isaiah's intention. We do not have an exact marker for where the Book of the King ends and the Book of the Servant begins. I can't decide whether our present narrative, chapters 38-39, ends the Book of the King or begins the Book of the Servant. That's why I'm calling this section, "a bridge." It connects both books.

We see it connecting back to what has come before. Hezekiah asked for a sign, which then occurs on a place called, "the stairway of Ahaz," and that's got to chapter 7, when Ahaz was told to ask for a sign. That's a wonderful, clear literary connection. We are supposed to be think of this father and son, good king-bad king. So we could view the story of the signs as a chiastic envelope of the main body of the Book of the King. So, the enveloping could begin with Ahaz in chapter 7, and end with Hezekiah in chapter 39, covering all four chapters of Hezekiah narrative here, at the end of the book. But we can also understand that enveloping to occur from chapter 7 through the first Hezekiah narrative, chapter 36-37, and then see the second narrative in chapters 38-39 as the introduction to

the Book of the Servant. If so, ending the Book of the King with a narrative about Hezekiah and starting the Book of the Servant with a narrative about Hezekiah makes a nice interleaving, or overlapping of the two books. And we do have to recognize that the end of the Hezekiah story in chapter 39 introduces the major threat of the Book of the Servant. Chapters 1-37 have occurred in the context of the Assyrian threat. Chapters 40-55 will occur in the context of a future Babylonian threat. This second narrative about Hezekiah foreshadows the future Babylonian threat. In fact, the words, “Comfort, O comfort my people,” in 40:1 do not make much sense separated from the prophecy of exile at the end of chapter 39. What do they need comforting from? They need comforting from this prophetic reality that they are all going to go into exile. Chapter 40 is a response to the prophecy at the end of 39. It is why God’s people need comforting.

So, chapters 38-39 are a bridge, connecting both backward with Ahaz and forward with Babylon. In the structure chart on the website at observetheword.com, I have left chapters 38-39 in the Book of the King as a bridge, almost as an epilogue. That’s my one major departure in the overall structure from Alec Motyer. He places these chapters as the introduction to the Book of the Servant. I left them at the end of the Book of the King because they really are a transitional bridge and could fit in either place. And because Isaiah is almost always divided by scholars at chapters 39 and 40, I thought it best to go with the traditional division.

The Structure of 38 and 39



Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).
*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

That is our literary overview. When we recognize the structure, we see that these chapters play an important part from a literary perspective, an important part from a theological perspective, and an important part from the human perspective. Now to the text. I’ll divide our narrative into four parts, using Motyer’s titles, Hezekiah’s Illness, Hezekiah’s Psalm, Hezekiah’s Healing, and the Moment of Decision.

Bridge: Hezekiah’s Fateful Choice (Isaiah 38-39)

Hezekiah’s Illness (38:1-8)

The narrative begins with Hezekiah’s illness. Isaiah 38:1-8.

¹ In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.’” ² Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³ and said, “Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. ⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah, saying, ⁵ “Go and say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶ “I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city.”’ ⁷ “This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that He has spoken: ⁸ “Behold, I will cause the shadow on the stairway, which has gone down with the sun on the stairway of Ahaz, to go back ten steps.” So the sun’s *shadow* went back ten steps on the stairway on which it had gone down.

How would you feel if today you received that word from God, “Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.”? Two details give us a sense of what Hezekiah is feeling. The first thing he did was turn his face to the wall. What does that communicate to you? Why would you turn your face to the wall? Does he not want anyone to see his emotion? Or does he feel despondent? Have you ever turned in your bed to the wall? What feeling does that communicate?

If we’re not sure what Hezekiah is feeling, the second detail is more direct. After praying, Hezekiah wept bitterly. So if that’s what you thought the turning to the wall meant, that it had been some kind of despondence or depression, you’re right. That picture evokes emotion in us of turning to the wall, but we get directly: it was in bitterness. The news of his death is a stomach punch. He does not take it with serenity, or stoicism, or faithful acceptance. He seems to feel betrayed. He pleads with God, reminding Him of all the good he has done. “Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” You know, it’s like a bartering with God. “God, you owe me, remember? I’ve been good. How can you let me die now?”

We see here what seems to be God changing His mind, maybe even going back on His word. He told Hezekiah he would surely die. Then he told Hezekiah, “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.” We might notice God never said when Hezekiah would die. He told him he would die, and he will. It’s just not going to be for another 15 years.

That’s true, God doesn’t say it, but that solution does not really get to what is going on here. Verbal communication often comes with unspoken implications or conditionals. Hezekiah rightly understood that when God said, “Get your house in order for you shall die,” God meant that with the unspoken, “You shall die soon.” That’s why you need to get your house in order.

I believe there is also an unspoken condition; one that Hezekiah could be sure about, because God left it unspoken. God said, “Get your house in order for you shall die,” without including the unspoken condition, “unless you pray to me sincerely, seek me from your heart, and request life. If you do that, I will give you another 15 years.” We can always assume that there might be an unspoken condition when God declares judgment. For example, we can always repent and pray, and it may be that God plans to relent if we repent and pray. It doesn’t mean for sure the unspoken condition is there. God is not saying to everybody, “If you pray, I will heal you.” We may be ill and it may be that God has decided it is time for us to go home and be with Him. We may ask for more life, and He may say, “No. Now is your time. When I said you will surely die, I meant now, unqualified.” But we are always welcome to pray and ask for life. And it may or may not be granted. We don’t know what else is in the mind of God, the wisdom of God.

God was ready to heal Hezekiah, but He did not tell him that in the beginning. Why not? Why would God not tell Hezekiah? He just says, “You’re going to die.” Why doesn’t it say, “But if you really believe and pray to me, you’ll live”? Why doesn’t God say that? Well, because if He says it, then of course Hezekiah is going to do it. But it’s going to be going through a religious formula to get life. I think God doesn’t say it because He wants it to come from the heart. He wants Hezekiah to seek God in his suffering. And that is so often true for us. God doesn’t tell us how things are going to turn out, because our suffering become a testing place to burn off dross, to burn away the things that don’t matter, so that we are left with the gold of our relationship with God and our faith in God. Now, what kind of faith is required that God would then relent and heal?

If a high level of dependence and insight, control and courage is necessary for deliverance, for healing, Hezekiah’s prayer would not have been received, I’m convinced. This is not super-spiritual prayer. This is very emotional, human, hurt, despondent prayer. He was bitter. And he gave in to the impulse to remind God of all his good merit, as if that would prove he deserved more life. This is not a spiritually heroic prayer. This is not the three young man thrown in the fiery furnace, who say, “You know, our God can save us but if He doesn’t, He is still God. You know, whatever. We are ready to die, we are ready to live.” That’s not Hezekiah here.

I am not trying to beat down on Hezekiah. I am sure I would not have responded any better to the news that I only had a short time to get my affairs in order and say my goodbyes. I would certainly have turned to the wall and groaned bitterly. I imagine I would be tempted to remind God of how much I have given up for Him and how important it is for my girls that they have a father - "God, my children need a father!" - how much Brenda would miss me; my mom should not have to see her son die first. I could make quite a list. I am not down on Hezekiah. I think he sounds very human. But I don't think that humanness impresses God so much that it causes God to change His mind.

Hezekiah does not change God's mind through the argument of a good life. But God did see what He wanted to see. God saw what He was looking for. I believe He saw sincerity and honesty; the interaction of real relationship. Hezekiah was not just going through the motions of ritual prayer. He spoke to God, believing God is real. He believed God's prophet when he told him he would die. He believed that word. And he believed God could do something about it. And we know Hezekiah prayed with sincerity because God answered the prayer. I've talked about that a lot in the podcast. We can't always know what exactly is in the heart of a person. We didn't really know what was in Ahaz' heart when he said, "Oh, far from me to ask for a sign!" But the response of God through His prophet Isaiah showed us the hypocrisy of Ahaz. And in the same way, we don't really know if Hezekiah's prayer just a formula to try to move God, or is Hezekiah really interacting out of a sincere heart in sincere belief, even in his weakness. How do we know that? Well, we know it because of how God responds. God sees and judges the heart and so we know there was something sincere and pleasing to God in Hezekiah's prayer.

God's answer adds 15 years to Hezekiah's life. That puts this prayer right around the time of Sennacherib's invasion in 701 BC. God also promises in verse 6, "I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city." Did you catch that? That's interesting because God already did that. That was chapters 36-37. Sennacherib's army is wiped out. He has gone back to Assyria. The city is not threatened anymore from Assyria. And it's not going to be significantly threatened by Assyria in Hezekiah's lifetime. The two narratives are not in chronological order. The city has not yet been delivered. That's interesting.

Why would an author switch the order of events? I assume it has to do with the theological points that he is making with the stories. He is using the stories as illustrations to make points. In the Lord of History section, six woes showed us unfaithful Judah depending on treaty with Egypt ahead of their covenant with God. The narrative of invasion and deliverance is a great illustration of repentance and faith that gives emphasis to God's faithfulness and God's power to save, God's sovereignty over super-powers like Assyria. So that was a great narrative to end that section with.

Our present narrative works better as a bridge between the Book of the King and the Book of the Servant. The story of sickness and healing links us back to Ahaz and the visit of the Babylonians foreshadows the next major threat. That is why these stories are switched.

Recognizing that the order is switched does makes me wonder how this sickness fit into Hezekiah's period of weakness leading up to the invasion of Sennacherib. We just don't know a lot about what Hezekiah was thinking and feeling in turning to trust in Egypt and how much he was involved in that. Isaiah's prophecy and the woes don't get into Hezekiah's state of heart. This sickness may have been a work in Hezekiah's life to turn him back to faithful dependence on God.

It's very interesting what Hezekiah prays. He prays as though he is reminding God of three things. "I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart and have done what is good in Your sight." That's a great way of life, to walk for God, in truth, with the whole heart, and to do what is good according to God: good in God's sight. Hezekiah thinks he is reminding God. I think God allowed the sickness so that Hezekiah would be forced to remind himself. Assyria has invaded. Hezekiah's counselors have put trust in treaty with Egypt. It is Hezekiah, not God, who needs to remember to walk in truth and with a whole heart and to do what is good in God's sight.

That's often the way of prayer in times of suffering. We may start by crying out to God in bitterness. But if we persevere in that honest lament, truly seeking God, we start reminding ourselves of truth. And at some point – and at some point, and this may take a lot of time - but as we go through the emotions, our eyes are lifted off our own trials and we truly see God in a new way. We see God through the lens of suffering. And over time we begin to see our reality from His eyes with a new perspective.

That's what I think is happening to Hezekiah. This experience is going to have a real effect on him. It is not going to be final. He is going to have to be broken again during the siege of Jerusalem. Still, this breaking through the sickness, is a real part of the process. God caused Hezekiah to fall ill because Hezekiah needed to be shaken, so that he might remember his former commitment to God and see things again from God's perspective.

Hezekiah is given a sign, just as his father Ahaz had been given a sign. For Hezekiah, the sign is a miracle of sunlight moving backwards. Ahaz failed to trust in God's offer of a sign. He pretended sincerity. Hezekiah has communicated to God honestly and sincerely. We need to see where that is going to take Hezekiah. How does this experience: the miracle of his healing and the miracle of the sign help him as he continues his walk with God?

Before we get to that, the next story in his life, we have a very special opportunity of hearing from Hezekiah himself about his sickness and healing. Hezekiah wrote a Psalm as a testimony to God. And Isaiah included it here in the narrative. This is fascinating, it's wonderful. We get to kind of see into his heart.

Hezekiah's Psalm (38:9-20)

The Psalm is reminiscent of some of David's Psalms that gave witness to specific, identifiable experiences. As is typical in a lament, the Psalm moves from complaint, to request, to trust and a sense of assurance.

Complaint (9-14)

The first half of the Psalm communicates Hezekiah's complaint. This is an expression of how Hezekiah felt when he was first told he would die, when he turned his face to the wall and wept bitterly. Isaiah 38:9-14.

⁹ A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery:

¹⁰ I said, "In the middle of my life I am to go.	To the gates of Sheol, I am to be deprived of the rest of my years."
¹¹ I said, "I will not see the LORD, in the land of the living;	I will look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world.
¹² "My dwelling is pulled up and removed from me; As a weaver I rolled up my life.	like a shepherd's tent. He cuts me off from the loom;
	From day until night You make an end of me.
¹³ "I composed <i>my soul</i> until morning. From day until night You make an end of me.	Like a lion—so He breaks all my bones,
¹⁴ "Like a swallow, <i>like</i> a crane, so I twitter; My eyes look wistfully to the heights;	I moan like a dove; O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.

Hezekiah feels wronged. "I am to be deprived of the rest of my years." He is about 40 years old. Being told to put his house in order applies both to his family and to his role as king. His family relationships are ending. His kingship is being removed.

Hezekiah does not look forward to Heaven. His focus is very much on his present earthly reality. Now, Sheol does not carry the same connotation as either Heaven or Hell. It is simply the place of death. Hezekiah is mourning the opportunity he could still have in life. He mourns lost experiences. He has more to do for God. He can be a better king. This is a very Old-Covenant believer perspective.

Hezekiah does not say that he will never see the Lord again. He says he will not see the Lord again in the land of the living, in the present earthly reality. And Old Covenant teaching focuses on the importance of relating to God and serving God on earth. The focus is on the physical, present kingdom of Israel. Heaven is not emphasized in the Old Testament. It would be wrong to say that Old Testament believers had no sense of a spiritual restoration that comes after death. Hebrews 11:10 tells us Abraham was comforted by looking forward to "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Isaiah has spoken of a future renewed Zion. Still, those future prophecies of Heaven are not frequent in the Old Testament, they are not very clear, and they are not the emphasis. In some truths God holds back. This is the idea of progressive revelation. Not all truths are communicated in the Old Covenant. It's certainly true about Jesus. It is not all made known. Some things are hinted at in the Law of Moses, suggested in the prophets, and then clarified in the New Covenant.

Hezekiah is not denying life with God after death. He is communicating the typical Old Covenant emphasis on experiencing God in the present, earthly reality. And by the way, that's not an emphasis we are supposed to lose in the New Covenant. We are supposed to maintain that sense of purposefulness as representatives of God's Kingdom on Earth. We are to be His witnesses in our families and communities as long as we live. Death is a loss. As New Covenant believers, we add on a more developed sense of the fulfillment that comes in the eternal Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. Death is a homecoming.

Hezekiah despondency is very human, very easy to relate to. He artfully expresses his sense of life's abrupt finality in the two images of verse 12.

¹² "My dwelling is pulled up and removed from me; like a shepherd's tent.

That his dwelling is pulled up and removed communicates the belief that this is something being done to him: this is not of his own choosing. The removal of a shepherd's tent is the removal of something semi-permanent. It was in place just long enough to get used to as the sheep eat all the grass in the area, but then abruptly, when the grass is gone, that tent is taken down and moved. That's how Hezekiah feels about the end of his life.

He brings out that semi-permanence again with the image of a weaver who has been working for some time on a roll of cloth, just long enough to get used to what he is doing, but then he is done. He roles the cloth up, cuts off the threads, and moves on.

As a weaver I rolled up my life. He cuts me off from the loom;
 From day until night You make an end of me.

With the semi-permanence you also get what is being done to him. So instead of the weaver cutting of the threads, "He cuts me off from the loom." God is doing this. According to Motyer, "From day until night," means "Before the day is out." "Before the day is out you make an end of me."

Verse 13 emphasizes God is the cause of suffering.

¹³ "I composed *my soul* until morning. Like a lion—so He breaks all my bones,
 From day until night You make an end of me.

Commentators have trouble with the phrase, "I composed my soul." Motyer thinks Hezekiah tried to be composed and at peace but was in such anguish he could not. Oswalt and Alter both translate the phrase as, "I cried out until morning." So, he is not trying to be composed. Either way, the reference to a lion gnawing on you all the way to the point of cracking your bones to lick out the marrow is an intense image of emotional agony. You can imagine Hezekiah crying out, "God, why are you doing this to me?!"

The complaint section ends with verse 14. Hezekiah was not able to compose himself. His prayer was like the warbling of a bird, feeble and inconsistent. You can imagine him groaning at the news of his death when he turned to face the wall.

¹⁴ "Like a swallow, *like* a crane, so I twitter; I moan like a dove;

14b gives us the beginnings of a changed perspective. In his moaning, Hezekiah says, “My eyes look wistfully to the heights.” Combined with the imagery of the birds, we can take this looking to the heights as a longing to fly again, a longing to be healthy and alive, with a future on Earth. But then he goes on to say, “O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.” So, looking up to the heights of what he has lost, he sees God. Seeing God, he makes his request. “O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.”

Request and Assurance (15-20)

This request signals a shift in the Psalm. In the rest of the Psalm, Hezekiah moves from complaint to request and then to assurance in God’s willingness to save. Isaiah 38:15-20.

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 15 | “What shall I say? For He has spoken to me,
and He Himself has done it; | I will wander about all my years because of
the bitterness of my soul. |
| 16 | “O Lord, by <i>these things men</i> live,
O restore me to health and let me live! | And in all these is the life of my spirit; |
| 17 | “Lo, for <i>my own</i> welfare I had great bitterness;
For You have cast all my sins behind Your back. | It is You who has kept my soul from the pit
of nothingness,
18 “For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot
praise You;
cannot hope for Your faithfulness. |
| 19 | Those who go down to the pit
“It is the living who give thanks to You,
A father tells his sons about | as I do today;
Your faithfulness. |
| 20 | “The LORD will surely save me;
All <i>the</i> days of our life | So we will play my songs on stringed instruments
at the house of the LORD.” |

Verses 15 and 16 are difficult to translate. It’s not clear whether Hezekiah has turned the corner and is making a statement of trust, or whether he still feels the bitterness of his illness. We have to make a decision in the first verset of 15. “What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it.” It is clear who has spoken: God has spoken, but what has God done? If Hezekiah is referring to his illness, then he is acknowledging God as the source of his coming death. That’s what God has done. God has made him terminally ill. The next verse is an overstatement since he does not have years to live, but he expects the rest of his days to be full of bitterness. If we continue this line of interpretation, the phrase, “by these things men live,” in verse 16 is an expression of resignation. Men live by the will of God. In God’s hands is the life of my spirit, whether good or bad. That is just the way it is. If that’s the right interpretation, 15 and 16 continue the twittering and moaning described in verse 14 and we do not turn from the complaint until the end of verse 16.

A second interpretation takes 15 and 16 as having already turned the corner towards request and trust. The “he himself has done it” could be the healing or the assurance of healing. Instead of “God has made me sick,” Hezekiah might be saying, “God has returned my health.” The next verset, instead of “wandering about all my years,” could be translated, “I will walk humbly.” He is not walking the rest of his years in bitterness, but because of this experience of bitterness, which ended with God’s deliverance, he now has a new perspective of humility. He expects to come out a changed man. “By these things men live” in verse 16 would, then, be a commendation to the type of experience Hezekiah has had in his prayer. We live by turning to God when we suffer, by lamentation, by pouring ourselves out sincerely until we are able to move through the trial and see God from a new perspective.

Whichever way we take these two verses, the more negative or the more positive, the last verset is clear. “O restore me to health and let me live!” That’s definitely request.

Verses 17-19 express deliverance. Hezekiah has not yet been healed. He will say in verse 20, “The Lord will surely save me.” The healing is still future. Lament psalms are usually written after the Psalmist has passed through the process of grief and has arrived at a place of assurance, but hasn’t yet seen the deliverance. Sometimes, that assurance is expressed in the present, making it sound like the deliverance has already taken place but that is to emphasize how sure the Psalmist is that the

deliverance will take place. In a sense it has. God said Hezekiah would live another 15 years. He may still be sick, but trusting in the word of God, he believes he will surely be delivered.

At the time of writing this Psalm, Hezekiah has already been saved from his pit of bitterness. That happened before the healing. He has come out of his depression and he believes God will surely heal. Verses 17-19.

<p>¹⁷ “Lo, for <i>my own</i> welfare I had great bitterness; For You have cast all my sins behind Your back. Those who go down to the pit</p> <p>¹⁹ “It is the living who give thanks to You, A father tells his sons about</p>	<p>It is You who has kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, ¹⁸ “For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; cannot hope for Your faithfulness. as I do today; Your faithfulness.</p>
---	---

The purpose of Hezekiah’s healing is that he might praise God among the living, that he might be a witness to the next generation. That is not an argument to God for why Hezekiah should be healed. This is Hezekiah recognizing, again, those three things he tried to remind God of, “I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” Hezekiah is being healed so that he’ll have another chance to continue living like that. He has recognized that his sin had become a barrier between him and God. He does not tell us what sin specifically. Maybe it included trusting his counselors who made covenant with Egypt. We do not know. But he does say that whatever those sins are, God has thrust them behind His back. God has dealt with them. God has put them out of sight. His sins are no longer between him and God. His sins have been cast behind God. Now Hezekiah can, again, walk in truth with a whole heart by giving thanks to God and testifying to the next generation.

Verse 20 brings together Hezekiah’s assurance of salvation from death and commitment to live a life of praise.

<p>²⁰ “The LORD will surely save me; All <i>the</i> days of our life</p>	<p>So we will play my songs on stringed instruments at the house of the LORD.”</p>
---	--

I don’t know how much Psalm-writing Hezekiah did before his illness, but he is ready to do some now. The Psalm itself is proof that Hezekiah intends to carry out his promise to praise God. He has put to words his experience, not holding back his initial despondency and grief. This is not just a happy song of praise. It takes us from the initial bitterness to an assurance in God. In the end, Hezekiah’s response to God’s grace is praise. And so, he wrote down a song for everyone to sing about his own experience of God’s faithfulness.

Hezekiah’s Healing (38:21-22)

The first section was Hezekiah’s sickness. The second was Hezekiah’s Psalm. The third is Hezekiah’s healing. This is just two verses, and these two verses focus us back on Hezekiah’s healing. In verse 22 Hezekiah oddly asks for a sign, even though he already received the sign of the shadow moving backwards on the stairs.

²¹ Now Isaiah had said, “Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.” ²² Then Hezekiah had said, “What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?”

This whole story of Hezekiah’s sickness told here in Isaiah is also told in 2 Kings 20. That passage does not include Hezekiah’s hymn. And these verses of the cake of figs and request for a sign to come after the promise of healing are put before the sign of the shadow going backwards. That would be between our earlier verses 6 and 7.

A lot of commentators assume this is a mistake in Isaiah’s text, or that a scribe came later and added these two verses to bring the story more in line with 2 Kings 20. They reason the scribe would have put the verses at the end, so as not to change Isaiah’s version.

Motyer believes Isaiah intentionally shifted this part of the story after the Psalm to make a point. I agree with Motyer. When you see weird things in the narrative of the Bible, it's so often intentional. Isaiah is not saying these two things happened in this order: after the sign had been given. He is referring back to something he left out of the story. My NASB translation uses the past perfect tense to indicate an action that had already been completed in the past.

²¹ Now Isaiah *had said*, "Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover." ²² Then Hezekiah *had said*, "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?"

I think that's the right way to understand this. These events occurred earlier, but Isaiah wants to bring them to our attention before he transitions on to the next episode in our narrative. The cake of figs was an outward sign of faith. Figs could not heal a terminal sickness. But when God tells you to do something, you do it, and that's an expression of faith.

Hezekiah had then asked for a sign. Isaiah's word should have been enough for Hezekiah. "You will be healed. Apply a cake of figs and trust God." Hezekiah wants more confirmation. God does not always appreciate being pressed for a sign. His word should be enough. God also understands our weakness. He sees a positive desire in the heart of Hezekiah and decides to give Hezekiah a sign.

And as we have said, that request for a sign reminds us of Ahaz. Isaiah wants us to make this connection before we move on. Ahaz had been offered a sign. He pretended to be spiritual, but God could tell he was being hypocritical. Hezekiah now asks for a sign. In that, he does better than his father. God sees his heart and approves.

Hezekiah has done well, trusting God for the sign and trusting God for healing. He has done well in his response, writing a Psalm as a witness to the faithfulness of God. Hezekiah has shown himself to have greater quality than his father. How will that translate into his performance as king? He started great at the beginning of his reign, but got side-tracked. He has gotten back on track now after the healing, and looks to be doing well. Will he persevere in that?

Let's see how he does when an emissary comes from Babylon. This is the final section in our narrative, The Moment of Decision, Isaiah 39:1-8.

The Moment of Decision (39:1-8)

¹ At that time Merodach-Baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. ² Hezekiah was pleased, and showed them *all* his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them. ³ Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said to him, "What did these men say, and from where have they come to you?" And Hezekiah said, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." ⁴ He said, "What have they seen in your house?" So Hezekiah answered, "They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them." ⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of hosts, ⁶ 'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the LORD. ⁷ 'And *some* of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.' " ⁸ Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." For he thought, "For there will be peace and truth in my days."

Hezekiah appears very proud in the opportunity to show off his wealth. The text does not tell us directly that Hezekiah is acting out of pride. Again, it is typical of Biblical narrative to not tell us what is going on inside a person's heart, but we have to get it from the context. And you get that feeling. It's similar to visiting a little kid's house and he wants to show you all his Legos he has put together, and every trophy he has gotten, and his science project, and all his drawings, and his motorized car, and his new helicopter drone. He is trying to impress, or to show off. One thing is fine. Two things are

fine. That's normal enthusiasm when you have a visitor. But Isaiah emphasizes how much Hezekiah puts on display for his visitors. "All his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them." That really sounds like showing off, a desire to look good in front of these emissaries. And when Isaiah asks about it, the "all" is emphasized again, "They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them."

Hezekiah's pride got the better of him. The emissary from Merodach-Baladan has stirred up his vanity. He is driven to impress the emissaries of such an ancient court as Babylon that he is no minor regional king. He shows off. And in doing so he acts unwisely as a king, revealing way too much information about his wealth and dominion to this foreign power.

This is the kind of heart attitude that quickly leads away from dependence on God to dependence on self and on worldly power. God responds to Hezekiah's ill behavior with a prophecy of doom.

⁶ 'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the LORD. ⁷ 'And some of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.' "

Again, the "all" is used to reveal Hezekiah's pride. As he had shown all to the Babylonians, the Babylonians will come one day and carried all that is left to Babylon. Faced with a decision about whether to trust in God or whether to court worldly power, Hezekiah, again, has stepped off course.

I do not think the curse, the penalty of exile is a direct consequence of Hezekiah's pride. But Hezekiah's pride is not going to help stop the inevitable decline of Judah. Exile will be a consequence of a faithless and immoral Judah, exemplified by Hezekiah's son Manasseh. Manasseh's behavior is going to mark the point of no return. That's the word given in 2 Kings 21:11–13.

¹¹ "Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; ¹² therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing such calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle. ¹³ 'I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

That image sounds like something Isaiah might write. Instead of just saying that Jerusalem will be destroyed, he says, "God will wipe it like a dish, turning it upside down." That's a promise of exile, a cleansing of the land from the sins of Judah, just like the land had been cleansed before from the sins of the Amorites.

The pride of Hezekiah does not cause the exile. But the prophecy of exile given to Hezekiah during a moment of pride with a foreign emissary is meant to remind Hezekiah of the critical need for spiritual dependence. Every generation is in danger of turning away. And when enough turning away has filled the land with oppression, injustice, and immorality, God will wipe it clean. Hezekiah may not be the cause, but his foot has just moved in that direction.

Hezekiah responds to Isaiah, "'The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'For there will be peace and truth in my days.'" How do you feel about that response? "The word of the Lord is good. There will be peace and truth in my days."

Some commentators interpret Hezekiah's statement as an act of submission to the will of God. I think that works with the first half. "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." When God speaks blessing, it's good. When God speaks judgment, it is good. It is the will of God. It is good. But I have trouble reconciling Hezekiah's thoughts with an attitude of faith. "For he thought, 'For there will be peace and truth in my days.'" It's not, "For he thought, 'God is good in suffering and in blessing.'" It's, he thought about his own days, not about future days. Well, yes, Hezekiah, there will

be peace and truth in your day, but what about the days of the next generation, or the generation after that? This statement sounds at odds with the ending of his Psalm. He said,

¹⁹ “It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today;
A father tells his sons about Your faithfulness.

That sounds like care for the next generation. Hezekiah’s thoughts sound self-centered. I believe Isaiah’s intention here is not to leave us with the picture of faithful Hezekiah, but to leave us with the reality of Hezekiah’s spiritual weakness.

And it’s not the end of Hezekiah’s personal story. Merodach-Baladan is the Babylonian king who just would never die. He was defeated by Sargon, but never captured. He was defeated by Sennacherib in 703 before Sennacherib turned towards Judah. He was not captured. He keeps raising up armies. This emissary from Merodach-Baladan could have come when he was still in Babylon in 703, before Sennacherib put him down. Or he could have come after he had fled and raised up another army. Either way, he would have still considered himself king of Babylon. But again, that goes with this story happening together with the sickness before the deliverance of Jerusalem. So even if Hezekiah has had another moment of weakness here in interacting with Babylonians, he is going to show his quality later when he trusts God for deliverance from Sennacherib. Like with all of us, Hezekiah’s life map reveals spiritual ups and downs. He began his reign full of faith, initiating widespread spiritual reform. You know, go, Hezekiah! He became sidetracked by the Assyrian threat, forgetting his dependence on God, turning to Egypt for security. We are disappointed in Hezekiah. But as Assyria threatens, he became seriously ill. During that illness, he experiences God removing a barrier of sin and he rededicates himself to a life of thanksgiving. He experienced two miracles – his healing and the Sun going backwards. His heart was sincere, but not strong enough to persevere. When an emissary comes from Babylon, he is tempted by worldly pride to make a good impression, probably also considering help from Babylon without consulting God. He is rebuked with a prophecy of doom, but in that rebuke, he shows the present threat of Assyria to dominate his thoughts and desires. He hears the word, “You are going to have peace. You are going to be rescued from the threat.” But he doesn’t have sympathy for future generations. The Babylonians leave. Sennacherib marches into Judah, capturing 46 fortified towns, laying siege to the second largest Judean city Lachish. This national crisis creates another spiritual crisis for Hezekiah. He responds by calling on God. He lays himself out in the Temple. He prays. He trusts Isaiah. He does well. He is able to enjoy God’s promised deliverance of Jerusalem and years of rest and security for Judah.

That’s the way I think the story should be told if we did it in order. Our last report of Hezekiah would be the positive one of trust and deliverance. Isaiah has not told the stories in order. So, we end here with a reminder of Hezekiah’s spiritual weakness and a prophecy of persistent faithlessness by Judah that is going to end in exile to Babylon.

Conclusion

Hezekiah does let us down here. And that’s very human. In fact, it’s a guarantee. There can be no true Camelot, no ideal city, no perfect king, president, prime minister, government. A righteous Zion is not possible while human beings still govern. Human leaders stumble.

We end the Book of the King with that truth. Hezekiah is a son of David, a good son of David as far as sons of David go. But he is not the promised child. He is not the divine King. As we turn next to the Book of the Servant, we are left with some pretty big unanswered questions. Who will this divine king be? When will He come? And how will He save a people so intent on turning to their own way? In our next lesson we turn to the Book of the Servant.

Lesson 20 Isaiah 40:1-11 The Consolation of Zion

Introduction

Isaiah		
<small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>		
Book of the King 1-39	Book of the Servant 40-55	Book of the Anointed Conqueror 56-66

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).
*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

We have hit a major milestone. We have completed our study of the Book of the King and are moving on now to the Book of the Servant! I've referred to the Book of the King as the first third of Isaiah. That's only true in the sense that Isaiah has three main divisions. In terms of content, the Book of the King is more than half of Isaiah: chapters 1-39, which is 57% of the text. So we finished just over half of the book. The section we are turning to now, chapters 40-55, the Book of the Servant, is half of that at 27% of the content of Isaiah. And the final section, chapters 56-66, the Book of the Conqueror, covers just 16% of Isaiah.

I am going to do two things in this lesson. First, I'm going to introduce the Book of the Servant by addressing two major themes developed through all of Isaiah. Second, I'll address our very first subsection of text - Isaiah 40:1-11 – titled, Three Voices of Consolation. So first, our introduction to the Book of the Servant.

Isaiah overlaps and develops themes as he goes. Identifying some of those main themes helps us to see the unity that runs through Isaiah and also see the special contribution of each main section. We begin to get a sense of what to look for in the Book of the King, what to look for in the Book of the Servant, what to look for in the Book of the Conqueror. The three main sections of Isaiah share themes, but they do not repeat the same content about those themes.

Since we are right now at the transition point between the Book of the King and the Book of the Servant, let's consider by way of example the two themes: Messiah and righteousness. Messiah and righteousness.

The Messiah Theme

The development of the Messiah theme is apparent in the titles we are using, Book of the King; Book of the Servant; Book of the Conqueror. Isaiah does not use the word "Messiah." The word means "anointed one." A king is an anointed one. Messiah specifically refers to the prophesied anointed son of David who will come to save. That concept of Messiah is what we see developed through Isaiah.

The Book of the King is framed by the bad king Ahaz and the good king Hezekiah, both sons of David. A future king is prophesied. Most of what we know about the future king comes from chapters 9 and 11. He is flesh and blood of the line of David. He is also divine, Mighty God, Wonderful Counselor, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. He will establish His government in righteousness and justice. And it will be an ever increasing government. Neither Ahaz nor Hezekiah is the kind of king we need. Isaiah teaches us to hope for a new kind of king who will establish a new kind of society.

That's all in the Book of the King, but that's not all Isaiah has to say about the Messiah. Not only do we need a new kind of ruler; we also need someone who can save us from sin. Isaiah develops the idea of the suffering servant in the Book of the Servant. He gives us four servant songs in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53. The Messiah is both the King who reigns, and the servant who saves His people from sin through His own suffering.

Not only do we need a king who will rule and a servant who will save, we also need a conqueror who will put an end to the brokenness of this world, who will put an end to wickedness and death. Isaiah develops the idea of an "anointed conqueror" who vanquishes evil in the Book of the Conqueror. Each Book contributes something unique to our understanding of Messiah.

The Righteousness Theme

Righteousness is another theme that unifies Isaiah, while also undergoing distinctive development in each of the three main sections. I first read about the development of the righteousness theme in an article John Oswalt wrote titled, *The Book of Isaiah: A Short Course on Biblical Theology*.⁴⁵ Oswalt points out how righteousness is used in a distinctive way in each book to develop a specific issue concerning righteousness. In the Book of the King, righteousness is almost exclusively a human activity. People are expected to live righteously and if they do not live righteously, they will be judged. Isaiah 33:14-15 provides an example.

- ¹⁴ Sinners in Zion are terrified; Trembling has seized the godless.
 “Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning?”
- ¹⁵ He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity, He who rejects unjust gain
 And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe; He who stops his ears from hearing about
 bloodshed
 And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil;

That’s the moral obligation of human beings, to walk righteously, to do righteousness. In the Book of the King, Isaiah does allude to the need for God to take away our sin. But he does not explain how God will do that. So, in chapter 1 he writes, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow.” How? How does God wash away the guilty bloodstain of sin? In chapter 6, Isaiah’s sin was burned from his lips. But how does that deal with the penalty of Isaiah’s sin? In chapter 39, Hezekiah declares in his psalm of lament, “You have cast all my sins behind your back.” Sin is removed from sight, but it can’t be that God just ignores sin. That would make God unrighteous. How is it that God is able to put Hezekiah’s sin behind him? We never find that out in the Book of the King. What we do find out is that human beings are required to live righteously to be in relationship with God. And human beings will be judged and punished for their sin.

Now, whereas in the Book of the King righteousness is a human activity, in the Book of the Servant righteousness is almost always something God does. Righteousness is usually expressed as a characteristic, or an act of divine deliverance. For example, in 45:23, “The word has gone forth from my mouth in righteousness and will not turn back.” In the servant songs we begin to see how God’s act of saving righteousness answers the problem raised in the Book of the King. How does God deal with sin? Isaiah 53:11.

- 11 By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will make righteous the many,
 As He will bear their iniquities.

This is the question raised by the Book of the King, “Is God still righteous if He accepts sinful people who have not persevered in righteousness?” The answer provided in the Book of the Servant is, “Yes.” God is still righteous when He accepts sinners because His servant has taken the penalty of their sin on Himself. God makes sinners righteous. It is a gift. That solution then brings out the classic objection to grace. If our unrighteousness is covered by the righteousness of God, do we even need to try?

Isaiah addresses that question in the Book of the Conqueror, where righteousness is applied to human action and God’s action. The expected response to grace is communicated in Isaiah 56:1.

- 1 Thus says the LORD, Preserve justice and do righteousness,
 For My salvation is about to come And My righteousness to be revealed.

God’s salvation and righteousness are parallel here, as common in Isaiah. Righteousness is something God does as He saves. People are to “preserve justice and do righteousness” precisely because God’s righteousness is being revealed. In the Book of the King, we are required to do righteousness, but we cannot. The good king Hezekiah is our model both of goodness and failure in the best of human

⁴⁵ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: A Short Course on Biblical Theology* in *Calvin Theological Journal* Vol. 39. (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Theological Seminary, 2004) 54-71.

beings. In the Book of the Servant, God steps in through a righteous action to deal with the sin of His people. And in the Book of the Conqueror, those who believe are called to do righteousness as a response to the righteousness of God.

Seven hundred years later, the Apostle Paul makes the same arguments in his letter to the Romans. Paul raises the issue of God’s righteousness and human righteousness in his thesis, Romans 1:16-17, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’.” (Romans 1:16-17). Isaiah has developed his argument through poetic prophecy. Paul developed a similar argument through prose discourse. And you have to believe, the way Paul writes and the phrases he uses, that he is completely familiar with this argument in Isaiah, that he has this wonderful advantage of having lived after the time of the cross. So he is bringing the cross and the resurrection into the argument, something Isaiah was only able to look forward to.

Paul’s thesis picks up on another theme of Isaiah, the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles together. That is not new to Paul. We have already read that Jews and Gentiles gathered together in the renewed Zion. There are a number of themes intertwined with the two I have mentioned, Messiah and righteousness. We could look at the themes of grace, judgment, Zion, holiness, pride, humility, glory, the remnant. These themes come together in the Book of the Servant around the particular idea that God must do something to save His people, not only from outward evil but, more importantly, from their own sin. To just bring Israel back from exile will not do, because they bring their own sinful hearts with them. God must make a way for His sinful people to live in relationship with Him without falling again into judgment. It is the old question of the burning bush in Exodus, “How does the Holy One of Israel live among a sinful, flammable people without burning them up?”

Isaiah answers that question with greater clarity in the Book of the Servant than it has ever been answered before in the Bible. With that thought, we begin the second major section of Isaiah.

Isaiah			
<small>“He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples.”</small>			
Book of the Servant 40-55			
The Consolation of the world 40:1-42:17	The Redemption of Israel 42:18-44:23	The Great Deliverance 44:24-48:22	The Greater Deliverance 49:1-55:13

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).
*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

We are going to divide the Book of the Servant into four sections using Motyer’s titles. In 40:1-42:17 we see the Consolation of the World. In 42:18-44:23 we see the Redemption of Israel. In 44:24-48:22 we see the Great Deliverance. And in 49:1-55:13 we see the Greater Deliverance. Those titles will come into focus more as we go through the text. We start with the Consolation of the World in 40:1-42:17.

Isaiah <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>						
Book of the Servant 40-55						
The Consolation of the world 40:1-42:17						
The Consolation of Zion 40:1-41:20				The Consolation of the Gentiles 41:21-42:17		
Three Voices of Consolation 40:1-11	The Incomparable God of Israel: The Creator 40:12-31	The Incomparable God of Israel: The World Ruler 41:1-7	Three Pictures of Consolation 41:8-20	A court scene: The idol-gods exposed; the world's plight apparent 41:21-29	Remedy: The servant as the answer to the world's plight 42:1-9	The new song: The world's joy in the Lord's victory 42:10-17

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

To console is to comfort. That's how chapter 40 begins. "Comfort, O Comfort my people." It is a request straight from the heart of God. The larger section is the Consolation of the World. But we do start with the Consolation of Zion, and then move to the Consolation of the Gentiles.

The Consolation of Zion begins with three voices of consolation and ends with three pictures of consolation. Consolation, or comfort, knowing that God is the foundation of comfort in our sorrow, in our trials, that's going to be the middle two parts of this section: the incomparable God of Israel, first as Creator and then as world Ruler. Since I have already done a lot by way of introduction, we are going to limit ourselves in this lesson to just the first subsection, Three Voices of Consolation in Isaiah 40:1-11.

Three Voices of Consolation

Context of Consolation

As we enter into this passage, remember the context. The context of consolation is exile in Babylon. Remember the prophecy just given to Hezekiah in 39:7, "And *some* of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon." One of the failures of Hezekiah was the care. He is just happy there is going to be peace in his time. There is no sorrow or grief for the future generations. But that's exactly what we get here. God's heart is, "Somebody, comfort my people!" God looks ahead and sees His people in exile. And though the prophecy speaks of an event 100 years in the future, God sees it as clearly as though it is already in the past.

His people are suffering because of their own persistent sin. They brought to pass Moses' prophetic word that they would break covenant with God, generation after generation, until God finally comes to the point of shouting, "Enough!" And then the end will come. The Israelites will be spit out of the land, just as the wicked Amorites had been expelled before them. The prophecy that God spoke through Isaiah to Hezekiah is line with those words from Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. There's going to be an exile. Israel is going to fail.

And yet, even in His just judgment of their sin, God's heart hurts for His broken people. He wants them to be comforted. He wants them drawn back into relationship with Himself.

As we look at this section, we are going to see that proclamation is very important. The speech of God is going to be mentioned three times. Another voice calls out twice. And Jerusalem is also told to speak. The good news must be communicated. The Word of God stands forever. God does not remain aloof and separate from this world. He acts. And He communicates truth about His action in order to bring strength, and hope, and comfort to His people.

I'll read the whole text first. Then we will consider its four parts: the Commissioning of the Heralds, followed by three voices. This is Isaiah 40:1-11.

¹ "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.
² "Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
that her warfare has ended,
That she has received of the LORD's hand
And call out to her,
That her iniquity has been removed,
Double for all her sins."
³ A voice is calling in the wilderness;
"Clear the way for the LORD
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ "Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
⁵ Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
And all flesh will see *it* together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
⁶ A voice says, "Call out."
Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
All flesh is grass,
and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.
⁹ Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift *it* up, do not fear.
Say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him
And His recompense before Him.
¹¹ Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry *them* in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

The Commissioning of the Heralds (40:1-2)

This passage begins with God commissioning heralds. At His call in chapter 6, Isaiah was commissioned to speak for God to a hardened people in such a way that the good news would reveal their hardness of heart beyond any shadow of a doubt. Isaiah's preaching would render their hearts insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim. He was to speak, "until cities are devastated and without inhabitation, houses are without people, and the land is utterly desolated." That sounds like exile.

At the end of the exile, God calls for a different kind of voice. He calls for heralds that will proclaim comfort to the people with an announcement of His coming. Isaiah is a foreshadow of these voices. Even though His message affirms a hardness of heart among the majority that eventually results in exile, he does begin proclaiming this message now, and it offers hope for the small remnant that receives it.

Perhaps we are to take this commissioning as an expansion of Isaiah's original call. Isaiah is to speak words of comfort to the ones in exile. That may be how we are to take this call for a speaker. We cannot be sure, since the first two voices are not identified, and the third voice is Jerusalem.

In this commissioning, the repetition of the word, "comfort," increases the emotion of the speaker, who is God. It's not just, "Comfort my people." It's,

¹ "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.

This comfort is spoken in a Covenant context. God says, "Comfort my people. They are in exile but they are still my people." You cannot see it in the English, but the word "comfort" is a plural imperative. Many voices are to speak comfort. Alter comments, "Perhaps it is simplest to assume that those addressed are people in general, or even the nations, enjoined to comfort Israel."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1888.

Motyer understands the plural to apply to the three voices below. He imagines the scene to be a Heavenly court, such as one pictured in Jeremiah 23:22.

<p>²² But if [these prophets] had stood in My council, And would have turned them back from their evil way</p>	<p>Then they would have announced My words to My people, And from the evil of their deeds.</p>
---	--

Jeremiah speaks of prophets who did not speak the words of God. But if they had stood in His council, kind of in His presence, at the court of the King, then they would have heard God’s words and they would have announced them to God’s people, and there would have been a spiritual impact. And that may be the image we are to imagine here, that God, surrounded in His court by His servants, He stands in council. And those who hear God’s word are commissioned to speak it. What is the word they are to speak? Verse 2.

<p>² “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; that her warfare has ended, That she has received of the LORD’s hand</p>	<p>And call out to her, That her iniquity has been removed, Double for all her sins.”</p>
--	---

“Speak kindly,” or, “speak tenderly” is literally in Hebrew, “speak to the heart.” Speaking to the heart implies both kindness and a desire to convince or persuade, so that the one spoken to takes to heart and benefits from the message. Jerusalem needs to hear this. Jerusalem needs to understand this. Speaking to Jerusalem implies a word to all Israelites. But it also invokes the image of a decimated city, defeated, unable to keep her citizens from exile. The city is about to experience comfort because the exiles are going to return. The three truths spoken develop the same idea.

First, Jerusalem’s warfare has ended. That’s the way the NASB and ESV Bibles translate the phrase. Oswalt, Alter, and the NIV translate it this way, “her hard service has ended.” Warfare ended for Jerusalem when she was defeated by Babylon. The hard service of the Israelites continued in the exile.

The second, related truth announced to Jerusalem is “that her iniquity has been removed.” That’s similar to the burning coal on Isaiah’s lips and Hezekiah’s sins being put behind God’s back.

The cause of exile - the iniquity of Jerusalem - has been removed. Presumably, it is the hard service of exile that has removed the iniquity of the Israelites. The people have done their time and they are now able to be released. That’s the sense of the third phrase, “she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

It’s not clear to scholars what “double for all her sins” means precisely. Why double? We know these two things about the punishment of the Israelites. One, it is a just punishment. God does not punish unjustly. “Double” cannot mean “twice as much as she deserves.” Two, we know the implied punishment does not actually fulfill the required punishment for sin. The required punishment for sin is not hard labor in exile. It’s not anything you can work off in this life. The required punishment for sin is eternal death.

We may have to assume that this declaration includes the idea of atonement: that Israel has received the penalty for her punishment in that Jesus Christ became the representative of Israel when He took that punishment on himself.

I don’t think that’s what this means. I think God is communicating the civil, or earthly punishment for the sin of Israel. The civil law of Moses included punishment for sin. That punishment was meant to prevent crime. That punishment was also meant to satisfy the victim and restore the criminal back into society. I am reminded of Exodus 22:4, which says that a thief caught with a stolen animal, an ox, or a donkey, or a sheep, shall pay back double. A car thief would not be required to simply return the stolen car. You know, wash it up and give it back, but would have to return that car and another car.

That penalty is intended to make a person think twice about the cost of thieving. It’s supposed to be preventative. That penalty is also intended to satisfy the victim who has suffered more than the loss

of an animal. He has suffered a violation of his home and his property. And that feels like a violation of your person. By receiving double, he is enabled to relinquish his claim against the thief. He has gotten twice as much back. And the thief is able to be restored to society, truly saying, "I paid a just penalty." The double penalty was the just penalty.

That thief still needs to go and offer sacrifice to God for forgiveness of sins. The civil penalty allowed for restoration in human society, but it did not remove the stain of wickedness that separates a person from God.

I think this idea of civil punishment is the idea expressed here. Jerusalem's people have paid double for her sins. No one can object to her restoration. She has paid her time. The need to pay the spiritual penalty for sin still exists. The Israelites cannot pay that on their own. That will have to be addressed later.

I do find it interesting that God begins in this call to comfort by assuring the people that their sins are forgiven. Comfort requires the hard honesty of addressing sin. We cannot be fully comforted, fully spiritually okay, emotionally okay if we do not acknowledge our guilt and our need for forgiveness. A major part of human comfort is the word, "I accept you. I have taken care of your sin. Go, sin no more!" God has declared to Jerusalem that she is forgiven. He has declared that she is ready for restoration. He calls for heralds to declare that good news, and more. He is going to add three additional components to the message and we are going to see these in each of the three voices.

The First Voice: The Glory of the Lord (40:3-5)

The first voice is to declare the glory of the Lord. That voice is in verses 3-5.

³ A voice is calling; Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

The phrase "in the wilderness" could modify the voice, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness." Or it could modify the way, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness." That second option works well with the repetition of the third verset, which is going to say, "Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." But the Greek translation of the Hebrew, known as the Septuagint has the first interpretation, and that is the interpretation used by all four of the Gospels when they applied this verse to John the Baptist. Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4, and John 1:23 all use, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness." John the Baptist fulfills the prophecy in both senses. His ministry out by the Jordan river made him both a voice calling in the wilderness and one who was clearing a way for the Lord in the wilderness. So, either way, it works.

Jesus certainly is the revelation of God's glory. John 1:14, "The word became flesh and we have beheld his glory." When the Israelites did return from exile and they rebuilt the Temple, God did not fill the Temple with the miraculous light of His glorious presence as He had for the tabernacle of Moses in the wilderness, and as He had for the temple of Solomon. The "shekinah" glory of God was not shining in the rebuilt Temple.

The Jews continued to consider themselves in exile as long as a foreign power ruled over Israel. Whether Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, or Rome. They were looking for the son of David to come and set up his kingdom. They were looking for the coming glory of the Lord prophesied here. They received both in Jesus Christ. But when He came to His own, they did not recognize Him. They did not receive Him. They rejected Him.

We might wonder how should we see Jesus as coming on a highway in the desert. But the text does not say He comes from the desert. The highway passes through the desert. And over valleys. And across mountains.

⁴ "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
⁵ Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see *it* together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

It's more like we are imagining a road that goes all across the land of Israel into Jerusalem, right up to the Temple. The people of Jerusalem are instructed to clear a road fit for the procession of a king. The language is expansive. It's, "Fill in valleys, lower entire mountains, smooth out the desert." It's like, "Make a true path." And then the glory of the Lord will be revealed. The image emphasizes royal preparation. Believe that God is going to reveal Himself in glory, and ready yourself for His coming. It's a call to faith and the expectation of the revelation of the glory of the Lord.

The first voice emphasizes the glory of the Lord. The next voice emphasizes the word of the Lord.

The Second Voice: the Word of our God (40:6-8)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>⁶ A voice says, "Call out."
All flesh is grass,</p> <p>⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,</p> <p>⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,</p> | <p>Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
But the word of our God stands forever.</p> |
|---|---|

One voice says, "Call out." Another voice says, "What shall I call out?" Again, we do not know who the voice is. The message is more important than the identity of the messenger. The message consists of seven closely connected versets. Alter comments, "The fondness of this poet for evocative repetition is evident here. In this case, it amounts to an incremental repetition, in which the increment is a strong antithesis to what has been repeated."⁴⁷ Each verset repeats the idea of the previous verset with a small, incremental change that builds up the whole idea that has been set in contrast to the final idea. Let's move slowly through the versets. Try to imagine the first verset as a drawing on a sketch pad. Then turn the page and imagine a drawing of the next verset with only small adjustments to the drawing. The end product is like a cartoon book you would flip through to create movement.

Starting with 6b, "All flesh is grass." Imagine a field of grass. What is meant by "all flesh?" And how is it "like grass?" We can guess, but we don't know, so you don't have to imagine that. We only have a field of grass. Maybe it is tall grass with slight movement caused by a gentle breeze. And get a picture in your mind of the grass. Then flip the page. "And its loveliness is like the flower of the field." Add flowers to your field of grass. Put some vibrant red, or oranges, or yellow, or purple into your field. Human flesh has a loveliness that is like the flower of the field. Fix that image, then flip the page. "The grass withers, the flower fades." This could be two or three pages. There is action over a span of time. Imagine green grass turning brown and then kind of withering, laying down flat. Imagine the bright colors of the flowers fading as the season passes. Flip the page. "When the breath of the Lord blows upon it." Aha! The withering and fading is not a result of natural causes. Imagine the Lord blowing on your flowers and grass, causing the withering and fading. Flip the page. "Surely the people are grass."

We have come back to the original simile with a little more specificity. "All flesh is grass" does not mean all animals are grass. It means "all people are grass." Isaiah introduced the simile in the first verset. He created a sense of movement in the next three versets, and then brought us back to the initial comparison. "The grass withers and fades." "Surely the people are grass." We come then to this truth, "All people wither and fade."

Isaiah is not done. This whole image has been set up to make a contrast. He repeats, "All grass withers and fades." That's the image he has fixed in our mind. We know he means people. Then we get the "But," the contrast.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,</p> | <p>But the word of our God stands forever.</p> |
|--|--|

How do you want to imagine that? A powerful, rocky mountain? You know, something that stands forever. This is the next message of comfort. People may seem to live forever when we are young, but we lose that sense of immortality as we go through life. We learn that there is no security in

⁴⁷ Alter, 1889.

human life. We get old, and so does everyone else. All our young, exuberant, powerful, beautiful friends now have grey hair, wrinkles, spots, aches, slowed reflexes, weakened muscles. The beautiful men and women. The people of power. They are all in decline. Others have taken their place. Many more have already given over their power, wealth, and fame to the grave.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.

God promises restoration for Israel. Put your hope in the Word of the Lord. That Word stands.

The glory of the Lord, the Word of the Lord, now the third voice speaks of the arm of the Lord, Isaiah 40:9-11.

The Third Voice: The Arm of the Lord (40:9-11)

⁹ Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;

Lift it up, do not fear.

Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him.

Behold, His reward is with Him And His recompense before Him.

¹¹ Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs

And carry *them* in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

This third voice is identified as Jerusalem so, interestingly, Jerusalem is told to "get up on a mountain." They were supposed to think of the people of Jerusalem, except that Jerusalem is on the mountains, so maybe that works.

⁹ Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;

Lift it up, do not fear.

This is exhortation to speak the good news even before it's happened. The exile is over. But God had said it's over, so it's now time to rejoice in the work God is going to do. So we are rejoicing ahead of time because we believe in the power of God. The arm of the Lord has overcome, or will overcome. We know it will. God will reveal himself in power.

Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him.

And His act of power will benefit His people.

Behold, His reward is with Him

And His recompense before Him.

This is the description of a king, a mighty warrior king, who leads his armies in battle, who defeats his foes with the power of his arm. This warrior king is God. He is mighty. He is also caring. You see it in the end. The concluding verse changes the image from warrior king to the image of shepherd king. The same arm that fights off bear and wolf also gathers in the young. He carries the newborn close to His breast, keeping it safe and warm.

¹¹ Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs

And carry *them* in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

Messiah is not mentioned in these verses. There is no direct reference to Jesus Christ. But for us who know how the story unfolds, when we look back, we cannot help but see Jesus in these verses. We especially can't help but see Jesus when all four Gospels attest that John the Baptist is the voice calling in the wilderness. So now we read this, and it says, "Jerusalem, say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God! Here is a warrior King, here is a shepherd King!'" Who else are we going to think of than Jesus?

Conclusion

A voice speaks of the glory of the Lord, Jesus. A voice speaks of the Word of the Lord, Jesus. A voice speaks of the Arm of the Lord, Jesus. And they speak of Jesus after God has declared that Jerusalem's iniquity has been removed, restoration is at hand.

The comfort of these words to this particular generation that Isaiah writes to becomes a call of consolation to all people everywhere, now that we have understood that the Lord coming is Jesus Christ. Be prepared for the coming of His glory. Be prepared for the coming of His arm of salvation.

At the same time, these words were meant to comfort the present generation, even though they are not even yet to the exile, and they certainly haven't seen the fulfillment that occurs in Jesus.

They can still take comfort in the fact that, though exile is coming, God promises restoration. There is hope for future generations. There is hope in the present. They can live with the hope that God will remove sin, that God will make His glory known, that God's Word stands forever, and that God's arm will protect and care for His people.

Now we just want to see how Isaiah is going to develop these themes. How will the arm of the Lord work with power to fulfill the Word of the Lord spoken in accordance with the glorious character of the Lord? We will find out as we study this second major section of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, the Book of the Servant.

Lesson 21 Isaiah 40:12-31 The Creator God – The Ground of Comfort

Introduction

Isaiah 40:12-31 is an amazing poetic reflection on the nature of the incomparable, Creator God of Israel. The beauty of the passage lends itself to being read and quoted without giving attention to the reason it is in Isaiah 40 in the first place. Why is this wonderful description of God here? Isaiah has just communicated God's commissioning of heralds to comfort the future generation living in exile in Babylon. This passage continues the consolation of Zion. To address this passage in context, we have to consider what the attributes of the Creator God have to do with comfort during a time of suffering.

Isaiah began the message of comfort in 40:1-11 with three voices of hope. Hope in the glory of the Lord, hope in the Word of the Lord, hope in the arm of the Lord. For hope in the glory of the Lord, the Word of the Lord, the arm of the Lord to be sustained through suffering, for that hope to continue we must have confidence in who God is.

At the beginning of suffering or grief, our emotional state is overwhelmed. We need comfort and care. I am reminded of the time Elijah, depressed by the lack of change in Israel after the defeat of the prophets of Baal, left Israel and walked all the way through Judah into the southern wilderness. He was done. He was leaving. He laid down under a tree to die, telling God, "I am no better than my fathers. I could not bring about change in faithless Israel." God did not confront Elijah at that moment. God let him sleep. Then God gave him fresh bread and water and told him to sleep more. And again he found fresh bread and water. Then God told him to walk to Mount Sinai. He still hasn't corrected Elijah's way of understanding his experience. Through that walk, Elijah didn't get one word of correction from God. He got a lot of physical activity. He got time to think. He got a place to go. We are not told what went on in his mind during that long walk to Sinai. But when he got to Sinai, God met him and spoke both comforting and challenging words. It was time to shake Elijah out of himself a little bit. "No Elijah. You are not the only prophet left in Israel. That is not true. In fact, there are another 7000." God could have told him that at the beginning. God doesn't. He gives him bread, and water, and rest. But at some time he needs help moving out of the spiral; a little push forward to a new perspective.

That's where we are in Isaiah 40:12-31. This is not the beginning of the lament process. If you want the beginning of the lament over exile, read Lamentations. There is only one brief hopeful word in the whole book. It's right in the center, but out of all of those verses in Lamentations, there is hardly any hope at all. It is the collective, emotional cry of Israel right after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. That was not the time for a new perspective. That was a time for weeping.

Isaiah is writing now to those who have already been in exile for about 70 years. Israel's time of hard service is over. They have paid back double for their sin. They have been exhorted to hope. That was the message of 40:1-11. Now they need to be shaken a little. They need to be reminded to look up and see God. Because to hope in God, they need to know with confidence in who God truly is.

They need to see how much bigger God is than their own experiences. They also need to know if God cares. And they need to know if God is willing and able to do anything about their suffering. Questions about suffering always come back to the nature of God. Ultimately, it has got to come back to who do you believe God is? Do you know God well enough, deep enough to hope in Him, no matter what you're going through? Can you hold on to Him? Can you trust Him? Can you wait on Him to bring you through? That's where we are in Isaiah 40:12-31.

I'm going to the whole passage, just get the whole thing at once, and then we'll go through their three major parts, and then we'll take each of the three parts in turn. Isaiah 40:12-31.

The Passage: Isaiah 40:12–31

12	Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,	And marked off the heavens by the span, And weighed the mountains in a balance And the hills in a pair of scales?
13	Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,	Or as His counselor has informed Him?
14	With whom did He consult, <i>who</i> gave Him understanding? Taught Him knowledge	And <i>who</i> taught Him in the path of justice And informed Him of the way of understanding?
15	Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.	And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales;
16	Even Lebanon is not enough to burn,	Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering.
17	All the nations are as nothing before Him,	They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.
18	To whom then will you liken God?	Or what likeness will you compare with Him?
19	As <i>for</i> the idol, a craftsman casts it, And a silversmith <i>fashions</i> chains of silver.	A goldsmith plates it with gold,
20	He who is too impoverished for <i>such</i> an offering He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman	Selects a tree that does not rot; To prepare an idol that will not totter.
21	Do you not know? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?	Have you not heard? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
22	It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain	And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.
23	He <i>it is</i> who reduces rulers to nothing,	Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.
24	Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have They been sown, But He merely blows on them, and they wither,	Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth, And the storm carries them away like stubble.
25	“To whom then will you liken Me	That I would be <i>his</i> equal?” says the Holy One.
26	Lift up your eyes on high The One who leads forth their host by number, Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of <i>His</i> power,	And see who has created these <i>stars</i> , He calls them all by name; Not one <i>of them</i> is missing.
27	Why do you say, O Jacob, “My way is hidden from the LORD,	and assert, O Israel, And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God”?
28	Do you not know? The Everlasting God, the LORD, Does not become weary or tired.	Have you not heard? the Creator of the ends of the earth His understanding is inscrutable.
29	He gives strength to the weary,	And to <i>him who</i> lacks might He increases power.
30	Though youths grow weary and tired,	And vigorous young men stumble badly,
31	Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; They will run and not get tired,	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles, They will walk and not become weary.

That’s awesome! This passage divides into three parts, verses 12-20; 21-26; and 27-31. Each of the three parts takes a slightly different approach to the reader. The first part is a rhetorical invitation to reflection about the nature of God. “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?” The second part is more of a challenge. “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” And the third is an exhortation to apply what you ought to know. “Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD?’”

Three particular aspects of God's nature are repeated in each of these three parts. First, as Creator, God must be immensely powerful. Second, he must also be unbelievably wise. Third, God is absolutely unique. He is incomparable. There is no one like God at all.

That's our basic structure. We have three parts, an invitation; a challenge; and an exhortation. And each part considers these three aspects of our Creator God's character, His power; His wisdom; and His uniqueness.

An Invitation to Consider the Creator God's Attributes (40:12-20)

The first section 40:12-20 begins in verse 12 with a rhetorical invitation to consider the immense power of God as Creator.

The Power of the Creator God (12)

¹² Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,	And marked off the heavens by the span, And weighed the mountains in a balance
--	---

And the hills in a pair of scales?

You can't miss the synonymous parallelism from verset to verset in the verbs, "measured," "marked off," "calculated," and "weighed." Those actions are all the same thing. Different words, same action of measurement. What is measured changes in each verset: waters, heavens, dust, mountains, hills. The tool for measurement changes too, hollow of the hand, span, measure, balance, of scales.

We are invited to imagine God at work like a carpenter or as a builder in a poetic way to think about the immensity of who God is. If you have good science in the knowledge of the Universe, it doesn't compete with this; it enhances this. If you are aware of the immensity of things, then bring that knowledge into this poetic imagining of how big God is. So imagine God at work like a carpenter or a builder. What tool might God use to measure all the water on Earth, all the oceans, and rivers, and lakes? He is not going to use a bucket, or a tub, or even a 1000-liter tank. That's like emptying a swimming pool with a thimble. Any conceivable measuring tool is tiny compared to all the water on the Earth. What could we use? Hmmm! The hollow of God's hand. That's the immensity of God. Try it with a cup of tea. Go to your kitchen, pull out a teacup. How many handfuls to fill the cup? It took me 14. Now let's do that for, let's say, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic, the Pacific. The Pacific is huge. 714 million cubic kilometers, not meters, but 714 cubic kilometers of water. That's what, 8, 9 handfuls for God? No problem. That's the scale He works on.

He can span the heavens. He has a stick He can use for that. He's got a thousand kilometer stick and a million kilometer stick. He has got the right stick for whatever work He is doing. He can use one of those to mark off the heavens. He's also got a couple of measuring baskets to calculate the volume of all the dust in the world, and a balance; He can take Mount Everest and put it on a balance, and He's got these weights on the other side He can add or take off to figure out the weight of Everest. He's got also a smaller pair of scales with more precise weights for hills. With those images Isaiah invites us to consider the immensity of God, the power of God. What kind of being creates on the scale of the Universe? God does. The Creator God of Israel creates on that scale.

The Wisdom of the Creator God (13-14)

Another attribute. It's one thing to be immense in your power. It's another thing to understand what you are doing. A roofer might hire a strapping young teenager to carry the shingles up to the roof, but he is not going to put him in charge of the job site. Verses 13 and 14.

¹³ Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, ¹⁴ With whom did He consult, <i>who</i> gave Him understanding? Taught Him knowledge	Or as His counselor has informed Him? And <i>who</i> taught Him in the path of justice And informed Him of the way of understanding?
---	--

What university did God go to? Who taught Him physics? Where did He learn chemistry, biology? Where did He get His doctorate in Universe creation? Who enlightened God on how to create matter? And who gives Him spiritual direction? Who helps God understand metaphysics? What counselors gather around God to inform Him on the state of the nations, to help Him understand politics and worldwide economics? Who does God consult, who does He go to when He is not sure what decision to make? Who helps Him think through His motives, and whose couch does He lie down on? Who helps Him think about what he really wants to get out of a relationship? Who teaches God about love? Who teaches God about race issues and poverty, the abuse of children, and the plight of immigrants? Who helps God with social justice, and criminal justice, and political justice?

With immense power and unbelievable wisdom God called into existence something from nothing. He fashioned the Sun, a ball of gas, to give off a relatively unending source of heat and light. Not really unending, as far as we're concerned a lightbulb that lasts millions of years will do. Not only did He craft the Sun; He crafted a solid planet 100 times smaller and placed it 150 million kilometers away, just the right distance and just the right size, it's just right to maintain an orbit in the delicate sweet spot necessary for biological life.⁴⁸ A fraction closer to the Sun or farther from the Sun and the temperature swing would make life impossible, just a fraction and everything either boils or freezes. Who helped God out with that?

Who informed Him of the way of understanding? No one. God is self-dependent in all His knowledge. He goes to know one for help. No university, no psychiatrist, no spiritual director. God's wisdom and knowledge are without end. He knows all that can be known, and He knows what to do with it. He knows how it works.

The Uniqueness of the Creator God Compared to Human Nations (15-17)

So, God, is immensely powerful and unbelievably wise. Who else is like that? Who can we compare God to? Verses 15-20 speak to the uniqueness of God. This is in two parts. We start with 15-17.

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 15 | Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, | And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; |
| | | Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. |
| 16 | Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, | Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. |
| 17 | All the nations are as nothing before Him, | They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless. |

Who else has the power to bring such an incredible amount of matter into existence and fashion it in such a finely tuned manner for life to thrive on the planet Earth?

Isaiah does not bother with individual comparisons. He tells us that entire nations of people – not one person but nations of people - become insignificant when compared to God. It is a wildly unfair comparison, but since we human beings so often put ourselves up on a level to judge God; you know, we think we know better than Him, the comparison must be made to give us an accurate sense of who we are really talking about when we talk about God.

Compared to God, whole nations of people are a “drop from a bucket” and a “speck of dust on the scales.” Those two metaphors connect us back to the earlier verse, when Isaiah asked, “Who calculated the dust of the earth by a measure...and the hills in a pair of scales?” That was the inanimate creation. Now we are using it for the animate creation: for humanity. If an entire nation is a drop in a bucket, all the nations together do not even start to fill the bucket. Or if island nations like Cyprus, Crete, Malta are specks of fine dust, you'd have to squint closely at the speck to make out the shape, you can't even see it.

⁴⁸ My editor Davor Edelinski encouraged me to include this clarification, “Earth is some 152 million km away from the Sun, while at its perihelion (in January) it's 147 million km away from the Sun. So there's some 5 million km leeway between the Earth's farthest and closest distances from the Sun. Also, notice that we are the farthest during the Northern hemisphere's summer, and it is actually the tilt of the axis of our rotation that determines our temperature and our seasons, and the distance is just one of the factors.” So, the sweet spot is in a range of 5 million kilometers and only one of several factors that make the earth inhabitable.

needs of human beings, it is still a psychological construct. We are saying there is a real Creator God who really made stuff out of nothing. And when you compare the power and wisdom of the one true Creator God to all other gods, they really are sticks of wood covered with gold set in place by human beings, who have to prop them up so that they will not totter and fall.

But however advanced their religion and theology is, it is a human creation that does not compare at all to a real God, who can really create a Universe. Isaiah mocks two ideas here. First, he mocks the idea that any image can adequately capture the nature of who God is. How does an idol truly represent God? And we have to include the image of a lion or a lamb. God is not a lion and God is not a lamb. God is not a baby born at Christmas. God is not a man crucified on a cross. Those images convey particular truths about who God is, but each image also lacks other truths about who God is. God transcends physical reality. There is no image, there is no theological system that can fully, comprehensively, accurately representation the nature of who God is. God is unique.

The second idea mocked here is that human beings can create their own gods. We do not define God. God defines us. True religion cannot be man-made. True knowledge, true worship, true moral practice must be communicated by God to us. We do not have in ourselves the wisdom, the spiritual insight, the moral goodness necessary to comprehend or describe the nature of God. We have flashes of insight because God has placed something of Himself in us. So some true morality is in all religions, pretty much all religions. We are fashioned in His image. We should not confuse our innate attraction to the truth about who God is with competency in defining for ourselves the nature of God. Whatever we create will be deeply flawed. We will have to artificially hold up gods of our own making, so that they do not totter and fall. No human religion can compete with the power and wisdom of the true God. He is not like any man. He is not like any god. He is absolutely unique.

Okay, so with verse 20 we've completed the first main part of this passage. Isaiah has invited us to consider the immensity, the wisdom, and the uniqueness of God. Now Isaiah challenges us to admit that knowledge of God's attributes has not been hidden. We should know these things. The challenge to admit knowledge of the Creator God's attributes is in 40:21-26. I'll start with 21-24.

A Challenge to Admit Knowledge of the Creator God's Attributes (40:21-26)

- | | |
|--|--|
| ²¹ Do you not know?
Has it not been declared to you from
the beginning? | Have you not heard?
Have you not understood from the foundations
of the earth? |
| ²² It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain | And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. |
| ²³ He <i>it is</i> who reduces rulers to nothing, | Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless. |
| ²⁴ Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have
They been sown,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither, | Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
And the storm carries them away like stubble. |

Isaiah does not develop the "how" we ought to know. He just says we ought to know. Psalm 19:1-6 and Romans 1:18-23 both argue that the creation itself declares who God is. "Since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." So that's Romans 1:20. Psalm 19 and Romans 2 both also argue that God declares truth about Himself in His word. Isaiah could have in mind either the general revelation of the creation, or the specific revelation of God's word, or both. Either way, he is challenging us, "You should know these things about God."

Isaiah makes that claim and then he summarizes what he has already said about the attributes of God. Again, we are made to recognize the immensity of God. God sits above the circle of the Earth. That's not, by the way, a flat Earth confirmation. The Earth is a sphere, not a circle, but if you were high above the Earth looking down on it, you would see a circle, just like we see a circle when we look up in the night sky and there is the full Moon, it looks like this beautiful, white disc in the night sky. So in fact, this is an interesting, accurate description as a poet, if you're saying what God would see as He is looking down, He would see

the circle of the Earth. He would see a disc. We have all seen pictures of it, the beautiful blue and green disc that an astronaut sees from heaven. Then, if you were to look closer, Isaiah says, He would see tiny inhabitants, hopping about like grasshoppers.

God's immensity in creation here is compared to a man setting up a tent. Imagine yourself putting up a tent in your backyard, and you're pulling the poles out of the bag, and you're struggling to stretch the canvas and to get the nylon cords just right, and finally pressing the metallic hooks into the soil to keep it steady, and you're really proud of yourself when you're done. Look what I did, I set up a tent! The Earth is the dwelling place God made for humankind. In Isaiah it's like God has set up a tent. That's how immense God is.

Also again, Isaiah reminds us that the mighty men of Earth, the rulers and the judges, none of them affect the activity and plan of God. God is completely independent and self-sufficient in His planning. They are as nothing, meaningless, in relation to God's sovereign plan for humanity.

Before Isaiah emphasized the tiny size of nations compared to God, here he emphasizes how ephemeral we are. It is one of the themes from our last lesson. How can a particular crop of grass fit into God's long-term plans when it is so quickly gone?

²⁴ Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
They been sown,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither, And the storm carries them away like stubble.

How does human kind affect the will and the plan of God? What is man to God? Not only is he so small, he doesn't last any time at all. Isaiah brings us back to the question of comparison and this time he puts it in the first person. God is speaking.

²⁵ "To whom then will you liken Me That I would be *his* equal?" says the Holy One.

That's interesting. He uses the term "Holy One," because Isaiah is not focusing on the holy character of God. We have that whole vision from chapter 6 and the glory of God coming out of the Temple, and Isaiah's overwhelming sense of sinfulness before God. That's not here, but just by referring to God as the "Holy One of Israel," and because we have been studying Isaiah, just that one reference adds in that whole aspect of God's character, who He is. He is not just mighty. He is not just wise. He is also holy. He is good. Then Isaiah suggests this exercise. If you want to feel a sense of the immensity of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God, go outside on a clear night away from city lights, you know, go out into the mountains or into the countryside, get on a boat and get out into the sea with no lights around and look up into that night sky. The ancients would have seen without electricity. It's just dark and you look up, and what do you see? And how do you feel? I'm betting you've probably felt this before. You've had this experience. Verse 26,

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high And see who has created these *stars*,
The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name;
Because of the greatness of His might and Not one *of them* is missing.
the strength of *His* power,

This is powerful at any time because this is just that human experience of being so small in the midst of something so large, at night, alone, looking up at the sky. But this is just one of those places where science just makes it blow up. It's so much bigger than even that. That experience is just suggestive. We know a bit of the reality. I mean, consider the size of the Sun. And remember that each tiny star is a sun. And the vast distance between stars does not bother God. The vast number of stars does not bother God. How many stars can you see at one time in the night sky? I couldn't find out an exact answer. I guess that depends on where you are and how clear it is, what you can see but somewhere between 2 and 5 thousand stars you see. And that's enough to overwhelm. God knows the name of each, Isaiah says. God is aware of what He has created. That's a powerful illustration. But then when

you add in what we know now about the size of the Universe, 2000 – 5000 stars is nothing. What we see is nothing. Scientists think there's between 100 and 200 billion stars.⁴⁹

And God knows each by name. He leads them forth like warriors in an army. God has a billion warriors behind Him. Isaiah's last verset in verse 26 emphasizes the God's wisdom, "Not one of them is missing." Of 100 billion stars God hasn't misplaced one. Not one is missing. God has arranged the Universe to declare the glory of His name. And He arranged it exactly as He intended to arrange it. It is as it was meant to be. God is sovereign. The Universe is not a mistake.

An Exhortation to Apply the Reality of the Creator God's Attributes (27-31)

In the third and final part of this passage, Isaiah brings his point home to the exiled of Israel. And I say "Israel" instead of "Judah" because we are not making a distinction anymore between the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This will be important for the rest of the book of Isaiah. Remember, the Northern Kingdom was wiped out by Assyria in 722 BC. There is no need to make distinction in the rest of Isaiah. Judah and Israel can now be used interchangeably as we look ahead towards the exile to come. In verse 27 that we are getting ready to read, Isaiah uses Jacob and Israel in parallel versets to make this point, that we are now using "Israel" as the Covenant name for God's people: all who came from Jacob, using it as the Northern Kingdom. And so the word "Israel" applies to all the remnant who are going to be in the Babylonian exile.

God's people, Israel, mourn for all that has been lost. The tribes are scattered, the land has been given to others, the Temple is destroyed. God declared at the beginning of chapter 40 that the time of punishment for Israel's sin is over. The people are free to return. Three heralds are commissioned to proclaim a message of comfort. The people are to be comforted by hope in the glory of God, by the infallibility of the Word of God and by the power of His saving arm.

For the people to experience comfort in these messages of hope, they must know and trust the character of God. Does the Lord really care about us? Does He see us? And is He able to do anything about our situation? That's what we all want to know in suffering and pain. Does God care? Does He see me? Can He do anything about it?

Isaiah has now spent the two first parts of this passage communicating a resounding, "Yes. Yes, God is able to save you from exile and bring you home. Remember who we are talking about. He is the creator God, immensely powerful, unbelievably wise, and absolutely unique."

He is able. Ok. He is able. Does He see me? If the nations are a speck of dust, does He see me? Does He care about me? Can we apply what we know about our awesome God to our present situation? This is Isaiah 40:27-31, beginning with verse 27.

²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD, And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"?

That's our fear in suffering. God, are you even there? Do you even see me? You might even accuse God "of the justice due me" escapes Your notice, God. This is not fair. It is not right. Our reflection on the immensity of God does not remove this fear. If the nations are a speck of dust and the rulers of nations are meaningless, who am I that God would even be aware of me? I am a blade of grass born this morning, withering alone in the heat of the Sun. I will be gone before God notices.

That is exactly right when we think only on the immensity of God. He transcends our earthly experience. He exists forever. I look at the night sky and I am overwhelmed by my insignificance. I am engulfed by its magnitude. God is so much greater. He is so much more glorious. Verse 28,

²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth
Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable.

⁴⁹ "In the Milky Way alone." (Davor Edelsinki)

Yes, He is everlasting. He is Creator. He never becomes tired. He is beyond my understanding. I glory in Him. And yet, in recognizing how far above the Universe He is, I feel left behind, alone in the dark. He never grows tired. Well, I certainly grow tired! How can He care about me? And these next verses are where it all comes home. God cares about people. God sees you.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary,	And to <i>him who</i> lacks might He increases power.
³⁰ Though youths grow weary and tired,	And vigorous young men stumble badly,
³¹ Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength;	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,	They will walk and not become weary.

God sees His people. God sees you. God cares.

“Though youths grow weary and tired.” That could be a description of the young man worn out by his effort. It is also an apt description of those who have lived a long life. Youths eventually age and grow weary. Young men eventually grow old and stumble badly. It also works as a description of burnout, or depression. The strength of youth keeps you going. But suffering, and grief, and constant toil sap that strength. You lose your vigor. Your feet stumble.

Isaiah holds out this hope. God sees. God cares. You are weary now. Will it always be this way?

³¹ Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength;	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,	They will walk and not become weary.

When, Lord? When will this be true of me? Is this a promise for right now? Do I just have to believe and, believing in true faith, will I rise up with the energy of youth?

Maybe. If you're really going through something hard, probably not. That's not what "wait" means. By definition "wait" means, "Not right now. Later. You have to wait on the Lord." Waiting here is an act of faith. Wait for when? Isaiah does not say. If we are speaking of the exile, then those first taken will have to wait seventy years for the return. Those who were born in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, not so long.

When we apply this comfort to our own situations, whatever it may be, we have to wait until God brings us through the suffering, the grief, the toil. It's not a promise for an immediate fix. This is not, "I believe and, all of a sudden, I have this strength of a youth." The situation might even end and yet, you still have a period of waiting. You still need to lament. You have to pass through your grief emotionally and spiritually. You might have a long wait.

One day, you will be able to set your eyes in the direction of the Promised Land. For us now that means setting our eyes on Jesus and His Kingdom. If you are in grief, beaten down, you will one day rise up again. You will run and not be tired, walk and not be weary. One day.

How long? I can't say. Waiting is a faith word. When we are healthy emotionally and spiritually healthy, we may be drained in the evening and invigorated in the morning. We may be tired after work and we're just praying in the car, and we get re-energized by the time we get home, and we can have a great evening with our kids. The wait may be only a moment; it could be a couple of hours; it could be a night, it could be a day. For deep grief and sorrow, wait may be a year or more.

This is also an already-not-yet truth. We can experience the invigoration of the Spirit to some degree in our present. We experience the life of grace now through our union with Jesus. But the complete, everlasting fulfillment of this promise is not yet. We get it already in a part, but not yet completely. We are reinvigorated through this life as we wait on God. At the same time, this is a picture of eternal life with God in a New Heaven and a New Earth. Our life on Earth is, in some sense, an exile from our true home. When we arrive in the Promised Land of the New Heaven and New Earth, we really will regain all the strength and exuberance of youth. Even if we never had strength and exuberance of youth in this life, we will have it there. We will be transformed with new bodies. Our mind and soul will be healthy and full. Our spirit will be in harmony with His Spirit.

Let's end with this. Consider the earlier promises of hope given in 40:1-11. Do you believe in the coming glory of the Lord? Do you believe in the truthfulness of His word? Do you believe in the strength of His arm? As you think about that, consider His character described in 40:12-31. This is the glory I am asking if you believe in. This is the truthfulness of who He is. This is the strength of His arm. Do you confess that His creation power is so far above anything you can imagine? Do you agree that His wisdom outshines your ability to understand and comprehend? Anybody's ability to understand and comprehend! Do you know that the nations are like a drop in the bucket, and yet, do you also believe that He cares about you? That He wants to give you renewed strength? Do you believe He sees you? Do you believe He loves you?

If you do, wait on the Lord. Wait on the Lord. And be comforted. Because...

³¹ Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength;	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,	They will walk and not become weary.

Lesson 22 Isaiah 41:1-20 Three Pictures of Consolation

Introduction

The comforting of Zion continues from chapter 40 into chapter 41. It is not easy to say for sure what Isaiah's structure is here. I am using Motyer's structure, which seems to me as valid as any. It's a helpful organizational tool. The theme of consolation helps to organize God's words to Israel and then God's words to the nations.

Whatever structure we use, we will be able to agree on some of the major themes. Isaiah typically establishes themes and then develops those themes by coming back to them repeatedly. Here are three themes that are initiated here and are regularly encountered as we go through the Book of the Servant.

Theme number 1: God is unique. He is incomparable. That was the main theme of our previous lesson. We will regularly come back to the uniqueness of God's being and character. Isaiah develops this theme both by describing the unique character of God and also by denigrating the idol gods of the nations. God is unique.

Theme number 2: God saves His people. God can send His messengers to comfort Israel because God intends to step into history and rescue His people Israel. Isaiah will develop two ideas of rescue: rescue from exile and rescue from sin. God cares about the physical state of His people. He cares for those suffering injustice and oppression. God also cares about the eternal spiritual needs of His people. God saves.

Theme number 3: God works through His servant. The servant theme is applied first to Israel. We will see that in this lesson. Who is the servant? The servant is Israel. God's servant Israel is shown to be weak, powerless, and often disobedient. We need a righteous servant who will act on God's behalf in history. Who will that servant be? Will it be Cyrus, the king of Persia who releases Israel from exile? Yes. Cyrus will be called "God's righteous servant." Is that the end of it? No. Because deliverance from exile is not the greatest need of God's people. Unsurprisingly, we will follow the servant theme through the Book of the Servant.

To our present passage: Motyer's structure is not Gospel, but it is helpful. The consolation of the world is divided into the consolation of Israel and the consolation of the Gentiles. We are in the first half, the consolation of Israel, covered in 40:1-41:20. Motyer sees a nice four-part balance. The first passage, "Comfort O comfort my people," included three voices of consolation. The last passage will contain three pictures of consolation. In-between the three voices and three pictures, we have two passages that emphasize the incomparable God of Israel. He is incomparable as the Creator, and He is incomparable as the world ruler.

We have studied the first two passages in our last two lessons: the three voices of consolation and then the incomparable creator God. In this lesson we will consider both of the two remaining passages: incomparable God as world ruler and three pictures of consolation. These two passages are covered by just 20 verses, Isaiah 41:1-20. We start with God, the incomparable world ruler, in Isaiah 41:1-7.

The Incomparable God of Israel: World Ruler (41:1-7)

- | | |
|---|---|
| ¹ "Coastlands, listen to Me in silence,
Let them come forward, then let them speak; | And let the peoples gain new strength;
Let us come together for judgment. |
| ² "Who has aroused one from the east
He delivers up nations before him
He makes them like dust with his sword, | Whom He calls in righteousness to His feet?
And subdues kings.
As the wind-driven chaff with his bow. |
| ³ "He pursues them, passing on in safety, | By a way he had not been traversing with his feet. |
| ⁴ "Who has performed and accomplished it,
'I, the LORD, am the first, | Calling forth the generations from the beginning?
and with the last I am He.' " |

<p>⁵ The coastlands have seen and are afraid; They have drawn near and have come.</p> <p>⁶ Each one helps his neighbor</p> <p>⁷ So the craftsman encourages the smelter, Saying of the soldering, "It is good";</p>	<p>The ends of the earth tremble; And says to his brother, "Be strong!" And he who smooths metal with the hammer encourages him who beats the anvil, And he fastens it with nails, so that it will not totter.</p>
--	--

The first verse is an invitation. Listen carefully to God's invitation. Who is being invited? What are they being invited to do? What is being promised to them? That's all in these four versets.

<p>¹ "Coastlands, listen to Me in silence, Let them come forward, then let them speak;</p>	<p>And let the peoples gain new strength; Let us come together for judgment.</p>
---	--

Who is invited? The coastlands are invited. Non-Jewish peoples live up and down the Mediterranean coast, beginning immediately with Israel's neighbors the Philistines. The invitation is expanded in the second verset to peoples or nations. The final verset invites them to come for judgment. Lawsuit prophets like Isaiah use this kind of introductory formula to call Israel to judgment in light of Torah law. But that is not the kind of judgment in this case. The coastlands and peoples are invited to listen to God in silence, and, as a result of listening, to gain new strength. That's interesting! It's interesting because it's a connection back to Isaiah 40, where God promises those who wait on Him that they will "gain new strength, they will mount up with wings like eagles." The promise to Israel there is included here in an invitation to all peoples. New strength is also available to the Gentiles. And as strength was granted to Israel as a result of waiting, which is an expression of faith, Gentiles must first listen to God in silence. That is also intended as an expression of faith. They are not invited to a grudging, rebellious silence. They are invited to respectful, receptive silence; an appropriate attitude of humility when God speaks.

After God speaks, the peoples are told they can then come forward and speak, that they would come together with God for judgment. That does not mean that God will put Himself on an equal level with all the nations in coming together to judge the truth of things. God invites them to speak, perhaps to ask questions or to communicate a response. It's an invitation to interaction, to relationship. The judgment will have to do with whether or not the peoples accept or reject the Word of God.

The subject to be addressed is, "Who truly rules the world?" Before God speaks, how do you answer that question? Who really rules the world? A natural response might be to look to the super-powers: for them Egypt and Babylon. For us, the United States, China, Russia. Or maybe for us, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon. It depends on your perspective of who really rules the world. And maybe we are conspiracy theorists and we believe there is a secret, elite cabal of powerful and wealthy people - they control world events, they really run things.

"Who truly rules the world?" Verses 2 and 3 initiate that question by referring to a conqueror from the east who is somehow awakened to action. He doesn't act on his own. It's not surprising to Israel. For Israel, there was always a conqueror looming to the east.

<p>² "Who has aroused one from the east He delivers up nations before him He makes them like dust with his sword,</p> <p>³ "He pursues them, passing on in safety,</p>	<p>Whom He calls in righteousness to His feet? And subdues kings. As the wind-driven chaff with his bow. By a way he had not been traversing with his feet.</p>
--	---

So the action is done by a conqueror, but someone arouses that conqueror. A conqueror coming from either the east or the north would be understood as a conqueror from Mesopotamia. The major cities of the two rivers lay more east than north of Israel, but any army would have to travel west, kind of up the rivers and then they would curve down on Israel from the north. So, Mesopotamia is described both as east and is north. Older commentators assumed the "one aroused from the east" was Abraham. He followed that route. Living east of the promised land, or northeast

in the land of Ur, he traveled west with his father up the Euphrates to Haran and then descended from the north. The reference to righteousness and the direct reference to Abraham later in verse 8 are the probable motivations for this interpretation. But the language of these verses is the language of a conqueror. Abraham was never depicted as one who comes and conquers.

We could interpret this reference to “one aroused from the east” in a general sense, allowing the ambiguity to stand. A succession of conquerors had arisen in Mesopotamia and would continue to rise up in Mesopotamia; Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians.

The question we are supposed to consider is who aroused the conqueror? Who is calling the shots behind this unstoppable power that comes from the east? Who really rules the world? Isaiah’s point may be that all rulers, whether acting in submission to God or in submission to their own interests, all conquering rulers ultimately serve God’s righteous plan. Right now in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin believes he acts out of the determination of his own will. But his action, even though evil, causing the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians and even thousands of his own soldiers, that action ultimately serves the sovereign plan of God in history. That could be the point here. It is definitely one of the points made in the Bible. It is made in the book of Habakkuk, where the prophet is shocked that God would punish unrighteous Judah through the even more wicked, conquering army of Babylon. That’s this idea of God ruling even through wicked leaders.

That may be the message here. But I do not think this “one aroused from the east” is intended as an ambiguous example of all human rulers. He is ambiguous here, but I think he is revealed later in Isaiah. At this point in Isaiah, we do not know who he is. I think the intent is that later, when we encounter Cyrus, the king of Persia, God’s servant, at that point we think, “Oh, that’s who Isaiah was talking about back in chapter 41.”

I think this is forecasting for us a figure that is going to fit this description. And Cyrus does fit the passage well. He came from Persia. That is not only east of Israel, that is east of Babylon. He was a great man of history that was raised up and everybody fell before Cyrus’ Persian army. The case of Cyrus acting as a servant to accomplish God’s plan to free exiled Israel serves as a specific example of the general principle that fits all human kings. Kings fulfill God’s sovereign plan, whether they intend to or not. The call to this king “in righteousness to God’s feet” may suggest that in this case Cyrus is seen as acting in right submission to the will of God. We do not have to go so far as saying that Cyrus believed in God as the one and only God. He could have believed in God as one of many, as the true God of Israel, not the true God of everywhere. And in that belief, he could have shown respect to God. We’ll have to wait in see how Isaiah describes Cyrus when we get there later.

The rest of verses 2 and 3 describe him as a victorious conqueror. He is unstoppable!

He delivers up nations before him	And subdues kings.
He makes them like dust with his sword,	As the wind-driven chaff with his bow.
³ “He pursues them, passing on in safety,	By a way he had not been traversing with his feet.

He makes his own roads as he goes. Verse 4 comes back and asks again, “Who is ultimately responsible for the victory of this king?”

⁴ “Who has performed and accomplished it, ‘I, the LORD, am the first,	Calling forth the generations from the beginning? and with the last I am He.’ ”
---	--

The first verset asks the question, “Who has performed and accomplished it?” We are supposed to wonder, “Who really is behind the victorious conquest of this leader? Who controlled the circumstances that caused this particular man to come to power at this particular time? Who motivated him to attack? Who empowered him to succeed? Was it all luck and human ingenuity? Who has really performed and accomplished this great feat? Does Cyrus get all the credit?”

With this first verset in verse 4 we are thinking about who has accomplished the victory of an eastern conqueror that has been described in verses 1-3, but then the second verset of verse 4 takes us from

the action of this one king back to the very beginning of humanity. Its not, "Who has accomplished this conquest?" as we have been lead to suppose. The question shifts to, "Who has called forth generations from the beginning?" God! God has called forth the generations from the beginning.

That answer to the question "Who?" is made very clear in the second line of verse 4. "I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last I am He." A lot of truth is packed into those two versets and we will spend a bit of time on this. We need to analyze it. We will encounter similar statements in chapters 43, 46, and 48 (43:10–13, 25; 46:4; 48:12). This is all speaking to the uniqueness of God. You know, one of our major themes. "I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last I am He."

Yahweh brought forth the generations, and yet, Yahweh Himself has no generation. Unlike most pagan gods, He does not trace His origin back to yet another god. "I, the LORD, am the first." The English Lord in this verse is the Hebrew name, "Yahweh." "I, YAHWEH, am the first."

Isaiah does not then write, "and the last." He writes, "and with the last." That's interesting! The Lord God Yahweh was alone at the first. But He has called forth the generations in order that human beings might enjoy relationship with Him. And in the last He is with us. Or maybe it is better to think about us being with Him.

Isaiah did not end there. "I, YAHWEH, am the first, and with the last I am He." "I am He" here at the end of the second verset points back to the name, "Yahweh," at the beginning of the first verset. The verse is chiasmic. Listen to the balance, "I, YAHWEH, am the first, and with the last I am He." Each verset has two phrases. The middle two phrases are, "am the first," and, "with the last." They are connected by the words, "first and last." The beginning phrase, "I, Yahweh," parallels the ending phrase, "I am he." Explanation of the name, "Yahweh," was given to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. Moses asked, "With what name should I identify you, God, when I go to the people?" God responded, "I am who I am. Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'" And that's the basic idea communicated in the name Yahweh. The name does not carry any tense in Hebrew, so it can be translated, "I was who I was," "I am who I am," "I will be who I will be." The timelessness fits the nature of God. He was, He is, He will be. In our language the present tense matches that timelessness best, just saying, "I am who I am." When we know the meaning of Yahweh, the parallelism of the verset stands out. "I Yahweh," the first phrase of the first verset parallels, "I am he," the last phrase of the last verset.

It is wonderfully well balanced, and yet it is even communicating different things. The first verset communicates the independence of Yahweh as the One who is without origin. "I Am" is first. And He is alone as the One who is first. The last phrase communicates the independence of God as One who is self-existent. "I am He." The LORD depends on no other. He simply is, "I am." He is first, He is self-existent, He is independent of all others, and He is with us. He is both transcendent and immanent. That means he is so far out of our league – transcendent - and yet, He is able to be right here with us - immanent. There really is an amazing amount of truth packed here into a very small amount of space.

Before moving on, I am wondering with this verse: does it remind you of something else? "I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last I am He." Does that bring to mind any other Scripture outside of Isaiah? What does it bring to mind? John uses this language repeatedly in both Revelation and in his Gospel. In Revelation 1:17 John writes, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last (Revelation 1:17)." And in fact, John has three ways of saying the same thing. They all show up in 22:13, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." That's pretty emphatic, it's three-part repetition. It's like, "holy, holy, holy." And maybe it is also supposed to be trinitarian, pointing to the Father, who is first and last; the Son, who is first and last, and the Holy Spirit, who is first and last.

But Revelation is the not first book that came to my mind when I read this. The first book I thought of was the Gospel of John. And that is John's primary way of announcing Jesus' self-witness to His own divinity. Seven times Jesus says, "I am," in the book of John. Actually, it's 14 times: it's seven times

saved by gods of their own making. Yahweh is rejected. And the peoples do what they always do, “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.” Rejection of true worship of God always involves a turning to something else, a turning to idols, whether those idols are physical or are the less easily identifiable idols of our hearts. Sad, sad.

God is incomparable. He is first. He is last. He is “I am.” He reigns sovereign over human events. He is the true world leader. And to the last, He is with those who respond to His invitation to come near.

The nations fear but cannot experience consolation. Comfort requires knowing who God is and submitting to the truth of who God is. God gives strength to those who wait. He gives strength to those who listen in believing silence. He is the transcendent Creator of all things and the immanent ruler, who guides human affairs and concerns Himself with the well-being of His people.

Three Pictures of Consolation (41:8-20)

As we began with three voices of comfort, we conclude with three pictures of comfort. The text is Isaiah 41:8-20. I will address the three images one by one: Israel the servant, Israel the worm, and Israel the afflicted. First, Israel the servant, verses 8-13.

Israel the Servant (8-13)

8	“But you, Israel, My servant, Descendant of Abraham My friend,	Jacob whom I have chosen, And called from its remotest parts
9	You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And said to you, ‘You are My servant,	I have chosen you and not rejected you.
10	‘Do not fear, for I am with you; I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,	Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’
11	“Behold, they will be shamed and dishonored; They will be as nothing and will perish,	all those who are angered at you those who contend with you.
12	“You will seek but will not find them, They will be as nothing and non-existent,	those who quarrel with you, those who war with you.
13	“For I am the LORD your God, Who says to you, ‘Do not fear,	who upholds your right hand, I will help you.’

Isaiah shifts from the nations who rejected God and turns his attention onto Israel, who were chosen long ago.

8	“But you, Israel, My servant, Descendant of Abraham My friend,	Jacob whom I have chosen, And called from its remotest parts
9	You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And said to you, ‘You are My servant,	I have chosen you and not rejected you.

The Covenant still stands. God views Israel as His servant. The translation, “servant,” softens the word for us. It is the word for Hebrew word for, “slave.” “But you, Israel, My slave.” Still, the word, “servant,” is the better choice, because the Hebrew concept of slave included a range of situations or uses. A foreign slave could be set to work in fields or mines and might be treated harshly if he had a cruel master. A Jew might serve as a slave to other Jews in the sense of an indentured servant. It was a way to pay off debt without going to prison. If the work was agreeable to the slave or if he fell in love with a fellow slave and had children, he might choose to remain with that master. In such a case he would probably be more of a servant than slave.

It was not unusual for free men or nobles to refer to themselves as a “slave” or, really, as a “servant” of a king. In the first part of Isaiah, the Book of the King, God refers to the court official Eliakim as

“my servant” (22:20). The court officials who speak to Isaiah are called, “servants of Hezekiah” (37:5). The Rabshakeh is called, “a servant of the king of Assyria” (37:6). In these cases, a servant is one who sees himself at the service of someone in a higher position. The way we hear the word “slave” does not quite capture the idea so well as one who freely submits to the authority of someone in a higher position. God is not addressing Israel as a slave in the meanest sense of the word. He is addressing Israel as a slave in a positive relational sense. As a son willingly serves his father, so Israel is to willingly serve her true Lord.

The reference to “Israel, My servant” is clarified as the whole Covenant people Israel; this is not the former Northern Kingdom of Israel, and we see that because of the use of the name, “Jacob,” in the parallel verset. “Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen.” This is all the people who came from the Patriarch. God’s people Israel are God’s servant, and they were chosen by God for that role. That choice is traced back to Abraham, who God refers to here as, “My friend,” which also throws a bit of a different light on the idea of “servant.”

Isaiah reminds Israel that God took them from the ends of the earth, from its remotest parts. The reference is to Abraham, so the remotest part here is to Ur, a significant ancient city on the Euphrates near the Persian Gulf. God chose Israel when Israel did not yet exist by calling Abraham and his barren wife to the promised land.

Israel is not in relationship by accident, nor are they in relationship by their own power or by their own goodness. They are in relationship with God because of His sovereign choice. Isaiah repeats at the end of verse nine those two key words, “You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.”

Even though Israel finds herself back in the land Abraham from which they once called out of, God assures them that He still sees them as His servant. They are still His chosen nation. They may feel rejected. They know they failed to keep faith to God. And they know that’s the reason they were exiled. They may feel very much rejected. But God says otherwise. They can count on the security of this covenant relationship. “I have chosen you and not rejected you.”

Moving on, similar to how verses 8 and 9 are bracketed by the words, “servant,” and, “chosen,” verses 10-13 are bracketed by the phrases, “Do not fear,” and, “right hand.” Verse 10,

¹⁰ ‘Do not fear, for I am with you;	Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,	Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’

This is the outcome of not being rejected. “You are mine. And because you’re mine, I am going to strengthen you. I’m going to uphold you.” The nations feared and set themselves to making idols – idols that they had to uphold so they wouldn’t totter. Israel is to not fear. They may not be in the land of Israel, but God is with them where they are. “I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you. I am your God.” And again, we get the promise of strength that was extended at the end of chapter 40. Wait on the Lord and your strength will be renewed. Here God says, “I will strengthen you. I will help you with my righteous right hand.” And He is committing Himself to the help of His people. After this promise of strength during the time of trial – the period of exile - God also promises restoration. Israel’s state will be reversed. Those who oppress Israel will be vanquished. Verses 11-13,

¹¹ “Behold, they will be shamed and dishonored;	all those who are angered at you
They will be as nothing and will perish,	those who contend with you.
¹² “You will seek but will not find them,	those who quarrel with you,
They will be as nothing and non-existent,	those who war with you.
¹³ “For I am the LORD your God,	who upholds your right hand,
Who says to you, ‘Do not fear,	I will help you.’

So you see in that repetition at the end God promises to protect Israel and says to them, “Do not fear,” just like He said at the beginning. That exhortation follows from who God is and His action towards Israel. “I am Yahweh, your God.” Remember that. “Do not fear.” And then, instead of saying He holds Israel up by His right hand, he says, “[I am the one] who upholds your right hand.” God gives strength. God restores. “Do not fear, I will help you.”

Israel the worm (14-16)

That was a picture of Israel the servant. The next image, in verses 14-16, is of Israel the worm. Each image begins with Israel in an oppressed, defeated, weak state, and then shifts to a picture Israel as renewed and empowered. Israel the servant was in a state of servitude to Babylon. God promised the defeat of the oppressor and honor is restored.

The image of the worm pictures lowliness, helplessness, and weakness. It does not here emphasize sinfulness. Sometimes that’s how you hear “worm” used in song or Christians referring to themselves as worms, you know, because I’m so wicked and sinful. That’s not the picture here. The picture here is: helpless.

<p>¹⁴ “Do not fear, you worm Jacob, I will help you,” declares the LORD,</p>	<p>you men of Israel; “and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.”</p>
---	--

As a worm, Jacob is incapable of affecting positive outcome on its own. We cannot produce fruit apart from Jesus Christ. We have to be dependent on God. But God declares He will help. And He declares it with the familial language of the kinsman redeemer. When a Jew entered into slavery to pay off his debts, any relative had the right by law to pay those debts on his behalf. If a relative was willing and able, he had the right to secure his kinsman’s freedom by redemption through payment. Israel has been sold into bondage to Babylon. God left them there 70 years. That’s the amount of time God determined that they would pay His debts. Now God is ready to repay the remainder. “‘I am willing, I am able, I will help you’, declares Yahweh, ‘your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. I am the one who is going to come and save you out of your slavery. I am going to redeem you.’”

Isaiah does not explain here how that payment will be made. It’s coming. He’s going to get there. Instead, he shifts the image. The worm becomes a threshing sledge, which is a heavy wooden platform with stone or metal points that a man or an ox would drag over grain to separate the kernels from the stalk and the chaff. Verses 15-16,

<p>¹⁵ “Behold, I have made you a threshing sledge You will thresh the mountains and pulverize them, ¹⁶ “You will winnow them, and the wind will carry them away, But you will rejoice in the LORD,</p>	<p>A new, sharp one with double edges; And will make the hills like chaff. And the storm will scatter them; You will glory in the Holy One of Israel.</p>
--	---

Israel is a nation-sized threshing sledge able to pulverize mountains and make the hills like chaff. In this case that’s metaphor. The mountains and hills are the enemies of Israel. Israel has been transformed by God from a powerless worm into a gigantic sledge.

One day they will be set free. One day they will be empowered to overcome their enemies. In that day they “will rejoice in Yahweh”. They “will glory in the Holy One of Israel.”

Israel the afflicted (17-20)

The third image describes Israel as afflicted and needy. We have done two of these so listen as I read. Listen for their initial state and then listen how they are transformed by God, what’s the transformation. Verses 17-20,

<p>¹⁷ “The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none, I, the LORD, will answer them Myself, ¹⁸ “I will open rivers on the bare heights</p>	<p>And their tongue is parched with thirst; As the God of Israel I will not forsake them. And springs in the midst of the valleys;</p>
---	--

I will make the wilderness a pool of water	And the dry land fountains of water.
¹⁹ "I will put the cedar in the wilderness, I will place the juniper in the desert	The acacia and the myrtle and the olive tree; Together with the box tree and the cypress,
²⁰ That they may see and recognize, That the hand of the LORD has done this,	And consider and gain insight as well, And the Holy One of Israel has created it.

In this specific picture of affliction and need, Israel is depicted as a people lost in a wilderness, unable to find water. The image reminds us of the Exodus. And there is an important reminder there. Release from exile, or release from slavery must be followed by a long journey home. That was true of Israel being freed from Egypt, and it will be true when Israel is freed from Babylon, it is also true of every person set free from slavery to sin. Every person called home first has a journey to complete. And the way home is often hard. Hope can easily fade on the way.

God promises not to forsake His people. As before, God emphasizes His personal connection to Israel as their Covenant God. "I Yahweh will answer them myself, as the God of Israel I will not forsake them." He promises not to forsake them on the way. Once you have reached the Promised Land, you know you are not forsaken. You're with God. He has brought you home. The water He promises here is not water of that Promised Land; it is water on the way. "Rivers on the bare heights, springs in valleys, the wilderness made into pools and dry land into fountains." And with that water there are plenty of trees. And other than one mention of olive, they are not fruit trees. They are shade trees to provide relief from the burning sun, because this is a picture of moving through the wilderness. So it's cedar, and acacia, and myrtle, and olive, and juniper, and box, and cypress. God promises to place trees in the wilderness and in the desert. God will care for His people as they journey home.

In places where there should be no water or shade, they find shade and water. Isaiah says that God will do this so that Israel may see, and recognize, and consider, and gain insight. God wants to provide for His people in such a way that they will know "The hand of the Lord has done this. The Holy One of Israel has created it." I think that's a challenge for us to look for the blessing. We are on our way home to Heaven. We are on our way home. And it's sometimes a struggle. Sometimes it's a wilderness. God is going to bless us on the way. He is going to give us what we need to gain strength. We are going to be weary because you don't need to be given strength if you're not without strength, if you're not tired. So He is going to give us the water and the shade. He is going to bless us on our way home to remind us that we have secure relationship with Him, that He is with us. But we still need to recognize the blessings when they come. And that's our prayer. We pray for the blessing. We need to also pray that we might see, that we would recognize, that we would consider, that we would gain insight, that we would discern God at work in our lives, even when we maybe don't feel it; that we would notice the blessings that God has given to us to give us strength and to keep us going.

All three pictures of comfort here have depicted Israel in a state of need. Israel the servant; Israel the worm; and Israel the afflicted traveler. All three pictures also depict God as Israel's hope. God will transform their lowly state. God will restore their honor. God will give new strength. God will provide water and shade. What God will do this? Yahweh, your Covenant God, the Holy One of Israel. Those two names are repeated three times each, Yahweh, Yahweh, Yahweh; Holy One, Holy One, Holy One. Yahweh, the Covenant God who will be faithful to bring Israel home as promised. And the Holy One of Israel whose glory fills the Earth: He is able To know God is to know that He cares, to know that He is able, to know that He is with you, to know that He will fulfill His promises to bring you home.

Lesson 23 Isaiah 41:21-42:17 Consolation of the Gentiles

Introduction

The consolation of Israel began with the famous introduction of chapter 40, “Comfort O comfort my people.” The section later ended with three images of a weak, downtrodden Israel, rescued, cared for, and restored by God.

The Consolation of the Gentiles 41:21-42:17		
A court scene: The idol-gods exposed; the world’s plight apparent 41:21–29	Remedy: The servant as the answer to the world’s plight 42:1–9	The new song: The world’s joy in the Lord’s victory 42:10–17

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

God’s care might begin with Israel. It does not end with Israel. The purpose of the nation Israel, going all the way back to the call of Abraham, was to bless to the nations. Israel was to be God’s servant, a nation of priests, who displayed the glory of God in their lives and who helped others come to know God.

In this next section we see His consolation extended out to all peoples. There are three divisions to this section. 41:21-29 is a court scene that exposes the plight of the nations. 42:1-9 introduces God’s servant as the solution for humanity’s plight. And 42:10-17 concludes with a song of joy in the Lord.

The initial court scene begins looking more like judgment than comfort. That’s sometimes the problem with good news. It does not sound like good news when it uncovers foundational beliefs as being dark and sinister. When you say to people, “You are clinging to death in order to make sense out of your life,” they may not thank you for that insight. To let go of the life raft only makes sense when you see and accept the truth that the raft is actually carrying you toward certain death. And even then it might not be easy to let go of that security.

Whatever we have chosen as a replacement for the provision, security, and life that God offers, whether it is relationship, position, achievement, or cultural religion those things are idols. Whatever gives us identity, control, or purpose apart from the life God offers, it’s an idol.

If our idols can be exposed as false, if we can acknowledge that we are clinging to death and corruption, then we might be willing to listen to a different message. That’s why this section of consolation starts with the bad news. Isaiah intends to remove false hopes, so that the good message of consolation might be heard and received as good. He does that by putting the gods of the nations on trial, 41:21-29.

A Court Scene: The idol-gods exposed (41:21–29)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>²¹ “Present your case,” the LORD says.</p> <p>²² Let them bring forth and declare to us
As for the former <i>events</i>, declare what they <i>were</i>,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Or announce to us what is coming;</p> <p>²³ Declare the things that are going to come
afterward,
Indeed, do good or evil,</p> <p>²⁴ Behold, you are of no account,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">He who chooses you is an abomination.</p> <p>²⁵ “I have aroused one from the north, and
he has come;
And he will come upon rulers as <i>upon</i> mortar,</p> <p>²⁶ Who has declared <i>this</i> from the beginning,</p> | <p>“Bring forward your strong <i>arguments</i>,”
The King of Jacob says.
what is going to take place;
That we may consider them and know their
outcome.</p> <p>That we may know that you are gods;
that we may anxiously look about us and fear
together.
And your work amounts to nothing;
From the rising of the sun he will call on My name;
Even as the potter treads clay.”
Or from former times, that we may say,</p> |
|---|---|

that we might know?
Surely there was no one who declared,
Surely there was no one who heard your words.
27 “Formerly *I said* to Zion, ‘Behold, here they are.’ And to Jerusalem, ‘I will give a messenger of good news.’
28 “But when I look, there is no one, And there is no counselor among them
Who, if I ask, can give an answer.
29 “Behold, all of them are false; Their works are worthless,
Their molten images are wind and emptiness.

This is another clear attack on idolatry. Isaiah’s constant linking of terms and themes between prophetic passages makes it challenging to identify where one prophetic section ends and another begins - and challenging to recognize the new information being communicated in passages with themes we have already touched on. Back in 41:1, the Gentiles had been invited to listen to God. That was followed by a reference to Israel as God’s servant in 41:8. Now, here in 41:21 we start with an invitation for the Gentiles to present a case before God which will be followed in 42:1 with a reference to a servant. The shared terms link the passages together like a puzzle piece. At the same time, the linked pieces are revealing two different invitations and two different kinds of servant. The two images might be side by side in the same puzzle, linked together by connecting pieces, but they are two different images in the larger picture. They really do show us two different kinds of invitation and two different kinds of servant.

This invitation is a summons to court. The pagan gods are on trial. The summons is presented in the name of Yahweh and in the name of the King of Jacob. This is the only time the designation “King of Jacob” appears in the entire Bible. I think Isaiah uses Jacob here, as he has done in other passages, to clarify that we are not talking about a king from the Northern Kingdom Israel. We are talking about the king of God’s Covenant people. Using the name “Jacob” makes that clear. This is all of God’s Covenant people. The right human authority over the unified people of God is calling the nations to trial.

The prosecution makes a challenge to the Gentile nations to bring out their gods and put them to a test.

22 Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place;
As for the former *events*, declare what they *were*, That we may consider them and know their outcome.
Or announce to us what is coming;
23 Declare the things that are going to come That we may know that you are gods;
afterward,
Indeed, do good or evil, that we may anxiously look about us and fear together.

The gods are challenged in their interpretation of the past and their knowledge of the future. They are challenged to look back in history at events that have already happened and to explain those events, and explain what the outcome of those events will be; explain history. “As for the former *events*, declare what they *were*, that we may consider them and know their outcome.”

Then they are challenged to look ahead in time and declare events that will be in the future. “Declare the things that are going to come afterward.” The charge ends with a challenge to just do anything. “Indeed, do good or evil,” just do something that might cause us to believe you are real, that we might have some kind of anxiety and fear, some sense that you affect the world.

Isaiah expects no response from the idols. Nothing from Baal of Tyre, or Dagon of Philistia, or Chemosh of Moab, or Marduk of Babylon, or Ashur of Assyria, or Ra of Egypt. He expects no response. Nothing from Anath, Inanna, Ishtar, or Isis. The court of God finds the pagan idol-gods impotent: guilty of deceiving the nations.

period of the Judges, some 1200 years before Jesus. The discovery of Ugarit uncovered hundreds of clay tablets, including several tablets describing a mythology of Baal, a form of which Elijah contended with during his ministry.

In the Baal cycle, the storm god Baal became angry at the sea serpent Leviathan and killed it. This angered Mot the god death. Mot defeated Baal and took him down to his underworld kingdom. Baal's sister and lover Anath, goddess of fertility and motherhood, showed that she was no one to be messed with. She went down to the underworld and cleaved Mot with a sword, winnowed him with a fan, burned him with fire, ground him in a hand-mill, sowed him in the ground, and let birds eat what was left. Thus, she rescued Baal and brought him back up from the kingdom of death.

This cycle recurred every year. Baal was the storm god. His imprisonment by Mot every year explained the dry season. So when Baal was in the underworld, there was no rain, when Anath rescued Baal, the rains came again. And even the imagery of Anath grinding Mot up, it's almost like she seeds him into the ground. She sows him. That is part of this picture of the fertility that is going to come after the release of Baal and the death of Mot.

John Oswalt explains with much greater insight how the view of history presented here by Isaiah challenges the more predominant view of history assumed by the Gentile nations. I'm just going to go ahead and read two paragraphs from Oswalt because I think it is much better to hear this from an expert. This is Oswalt.

"The pagan understanding of existence rests on the concept of continuity. According to this concept, everything that exists is part of everything else. Thus humanity, nature, and deity are all inseparable from one another. In an ultimate sense, the cosmos is eternal. What is always has been, and what has been always will be. In the cycles of existence there is no beginning and no end, and nothing ever changes. Thus, the way to tell the future in such a system is to find the ways in which the present is congruent with the past, for what happened in the past under similar circumstances must happen again. But the gods are absolutely helpless to tell us how the world began or how it will end; the gods are the system personified. By the same token, they are helpless to tell us about something that has never happened before. First, by definition there cannot be such a thing; second, the system cannot know what it has not yet experienced."

"Thus, Isaiah's attack betrays a penetrating understanding of the nature of the system he is attacking. He has attacked it precisely at its weak point. His attack also illustrates the breathtaking difference between his (and the Bible's) conception of God and that of Israel's neighbors. What kind of God is he who knows what has not happened? What kind of God is he who can explain the first principles of existence? He is one who is Other than the system, one who has made the system according to certain specifications, one who makes the system operate according to his sovereign will. He is the one who is himself "the first and the last" (cf. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12; and the discussion of "first" and "last" above on 41:22). Isaiah says, in effect, that anything worthy of the term "god" must be more than the system itself. Since these beings are incapable of independent activity, they are not gods. This is philosophical sophistication of a sort found elsewhere only in the logical reductionism of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. But there it is little more than an abstract formulation that was little more than a philosophical concept. Here it is the fervently held conviction of a whole people, a conviction that was to change the entire Western world. Whence came such a belief, except, as the Hebrews insist, through divine self-revelation?"⁵⁰

That was Oswalt. The challenge made here confronts the idol-gods of the nations directly. And at the same time, undermines the presuppositions Gentiles hold regarding time itself. Their worldview is found wanting and dangerous. The world is broken. People are broken. We need help. The gods are not real. They are part of the broken system. They cannot help. History is not cyclical. There is a beginning. We are moving toward an end. Human beings are not in an unending, inescapable cycle.

⁵⁰ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 106.

Now, having exposed the false help of the gods, Isaiah points next to the true remedy of human sin and need. God's servant will establish justice on earth, 42:1-9. This is the first of four servant songs in the Book of the Servant. The song is actually verses 42:1-4, and then we get a confirmation by God in 5-9.

The Remedy: The Servant of God will establish justice (42:1-9)

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
I have put My Spirit upon Him; | My chosen one <i>in whom</i> My soul delights.
He will bring forth justice to the <u>nations</u> . |
| 2 | "He will not cry out or raise <i>His voice</i> , | Nor make His voice heard in the street. |
| 3 | "A bruised reed He will not break
He will faithfully bring forth justice. | And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; |
| 4 | "He will not be disheartened or crushed
And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law." | Until He has established justice in the earth; |

Now the confirmation of the Servant from God, 5-9.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 5 | Thus says God the LORD,
Who gives breath to the people on it | Who created the heavens and stretched them out,
And spirit to those who walk in it, |
| 6 | "I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness,
and I will watch over You and I will appoint You | I will also hold You by the hand
as a covenant to the people and a light to the
nations, |
| 7 | To open blind eyes,
And those who dwell in darkness from the prison. | To bring out prisoners from the dungeon |
| 8 | "I am the LORD, that is My name;
Nor My praise to graven images. | I will not give My glory to another, |
| 9 | "Behold, the former things have come to pass,
Before they spring forth I proclaim <i>them</i> to you." | Now I declare new things; |

All four servant songs have the same pattern. The actual song describes the servant's task. That song is followed with God's confirmation of His Servant. If you want to look ahead to compare, the second Servant song is 49:1-6 with a confirmation in 7-13. The third Servant song is in 50:4-9 with a confirmation in 10-11, and the fourth, most famous Servant song, is in 52:13-53:12 with a confirmation in 54:1-55:13.

Who is the Servant? We have already encountered Israel as God's servant in 41:8. We will continue to see Israel regularly designated as "God's servant" by Isaiah. We have also already alluded twice to an important figure who will arise in the east and in the north. He will be identified as Cyrus in 44:28 and 45:1, where he will also be called, "God's shepherd," and, "God's anointed." He will not be directly identified as God's servant, but since he is called God's anointed, which is the word, "Messiah," we have to consider him as an option when we read the Servant songs. I am not saying he is THE Messiah. The word "anointed" meant, "king." It indicates God's choice as one he has appointed. Cyrus was *an* "anointed one." He was not *the* "anointed one" described in chapters 1-39, the Book of the King. That anointed one is a son of David, and He is divine. He is our third option for the Servant songs. Is this Israel? Is this Cyrus? Or is this the divine son of David described in the Book of the King?

Let's read verses 1-4 again and see if the text gives away the identity of the Servant?

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
I have put My Spirit upon Him; | My chosen one <i>in whom</i> My soul delights.
He will bring forth justice to the <u>nations</u> . |
| 2 | "He will not cry out or raise <i>His voice</i> , | Nor make His voice heard in the street. |
| 3 | "A bruised reed He will not break
He will faithfully bring forth justice. | And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; |
| 4 | "He will not be disheartened or crushed
And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law." | Until He has established justice in the earth; |

Could this servant be Cyrus? No. That would be a very difficult connection to support. Though Cyrus is chosen by God, the language used for Cyrus in chapters 44 and 45 does not support the idea of God delighting in Cyrus. And though Cyrus is called, “the anointed of God,” the phrase, “putting My Spirit upon him,” seems to carry the idea of anointing Cyrus as a victorious king too far. And though Cyrus does execute God’s righteous justice on earth by defeating Israel’s enemies and allowing the return of exiles to Jerusalem, this seems to fall short of “justice to the nations” and establishing “justice on earth,” a justice that leads Gentiles to yearn for God’s law. I will come back to the language of Spirit and justice in a minute.

The clearest objection to this servant being Cyrus has to do with the means by which Cyrus brings about the justice of God. Isaiah 45:2 says that God will go before Cyrus to “shatter the doors of bronze, and cut through their iron bars.” That’s an image of violent military defeat of an enemy. Cyrus will enter into palace and Temple to take spoil. That justice is accomplished through active wrath. But the Servant in this passage accomplishes justice through calm gentleness. He does not cry out in the street. He does not damage an already bruised reed. The initial means by which this Servant establishes justice will be very different from that of a conquering king. This Servant is not Cyrus, though Cyrus might in some ways foreshadow this Servant.

Could the Servant be Israel? That’s a more possible connection to make. Isaiah clearly identifies Israel as God’s servant elsewhere, using the singular to do so. Isaiah writes, “Israel, my servant”, not “Israel my servants”. So, the singular works here for Israel. Israel is God’s chosen people. And God does delight in His people. Moses wrote that God set his affection on them (Deuteronomy 10:15). Has God put His Spirit on Israel? That’s not so clear. But if we are looking ahead, we could read that as a prophecy of the pouring out of God’s Spirit on God’s people, just as we find in Joel 2:28. Also, God could use Israel to “bring forth justice to the nations.” And it could be Israel’s role to do so through calm gentleness, not through war. Finally, Isaiah has already written way back in chapter 2 of Gentiles streaming into Zion to receive the law of the Lord. That fits the conclusion of this Servant song.

So, if we take as our key piece of evidence, the references to Israel as God’s servant here in the Book of the Servant, we could imagine a way for the rest of the imagery to fit Israel as this Servant. That approach would be assuming this is Israel and making the pieces fit. But if we do not assume this is Israel and we consider the language of the song according to how that language has been used in Isaiah, we will find that Israel does not match up the best with what we have here. As God’s servant, Isaiah describes Israel as weak, or blind, or rebellious. Perhaps they were intended, they were meant to draw the nations into the justice and knowledge of God. But we do not see them doing that. We don’t see the Covenant people solving the dilemma of human sin and injustice.

Another figure already described in Isaiah does match the language of this song. We need to look back to the ideal king in the Book of the King, particularly at chapters 9 and 11. Here in 42:1, God says He put His Spirit on His chosen Servant. Back in 11:2, Isaiah said about the Messianic son of David, “the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him.” We were told in 11:10 that the nations will resort to this root of Jesse, matching the claim here that the Servant will bring forth justice to the nations. We are also told in 11:9 that the earth will be full of His knowledge and here in 42:4 that He will “establish justice in the earth” and “the coastlands will wait expectantly for his law.”

The idea in 42:4 that the Servant will continue on “until he has established justice in the earth” connects us back to chapter 9. The Divine son of David in 9:6-7 “whose name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” is also the One who will rule over David’s kingdom to “establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore.”

Let me summarize all that. The Messianic King of Isaiah 9 and 11 has the Spirit of the Lord on Him, blesses the nations, brings the nations to the knowledge of God, and establishes justice on earth. The

Servant of Isaiah 42:1-4 has the Spirit of the Lord on Him, blesses the nations, brings the nations to the knowledge of God's law, and establishes justice on earth.

The Book of the King points to our need for a new kind of King. Israel's kings are to aspire to the qualities of the ideal king, but they cannot attain that ideal. So too, all of God's people should aspire to the qualities of the ideal servant, even though they cannot attain to that ideal. Just as the Book of the King points to our need for a new kind of king, so too, the Book of the Servant points us to our need for a new kind of servant. Israel cannot attain justice for herself, much less for the world.

Are the Messianic King and the Servant the same person? Jewish interpretation varied. Some interpreters before Christ identified the Servant as Israel. Even so, Craig Blomberg notes in his commentary on Matthew that 200 years before the birth of Jesus, Targum Jonathan, a translation from Hebrew to Aramaic, identifies the servant of Isaiah 42:1 with the Messiah, the individual person, the son of David. It was a definite option considered by Jewish scholars who tried to interpret Isaiah.

Early Christians had no doubt about the identification of the Servant. Matthew quotes this whole Servant song in Matthew 12:18-21 as a description of Jesus. It is the longest direct quote of the Old Testament in Matthew, and Matthew likes to quote the Old Testament. He had just written about Jesus doing a healing on the Sabbath that angered people in the synagogue. Pharisees go out from Jesus and plot how to destroy Him, while even bigger crowds come to Jesus for more healing. Jesus heals them and warns them not to tell who He was.

Matthew seems to be making two connections with this particular Servant song. Jesus responded to those who challenged Him, but He did not engage in shouting matches. We have no record of Him delivering the ranting speeches of a zealot. He even cautioned people from speaking about Him. As Isaiah 42:2 says, "He will not cry out or raise his voice, nor make his voice heard in the street." That picture does not prevent Jesus from teaching as He stands in a boat, or as He sits on a mountainside, or as He walks in the street. He does speak with a voice loud enough to hear. But He is not crying out as a conquering general or a zealot leader. He conducts His ministry with calm, confident persistence.

What's more, "a bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish." That's not a picture of force or violence. It is true that Jesus will return as the lion of Judah. He is also king and conqueror. But the cross must come before the crown; the lamb before the lion.

We are probably so used to Isaiah's poetic imagery of a bruised reed that we hardly think about it, but it is original to Isaiah. And it's a wonderful image that wonderfully expresses fragility. How easy to break a reed, even more an already bruised reed! How easy it is to snuff out a wick of a lamp, and how much more one that hardly has any oil, that is barely flickering? It's dim. You just touch it with your fingers and it's gone. But we look at Jesus and we see His joy of children scrambling up on His lap; His healing of the man with the withered hand who happened to come to him on a Sabbath; His invitation to a woman facing her seventh husband (not even her husband!); His acceptance of another woman caught in prostitution: His respect towards a diminutive tax collector hanging from a tree – all people He could easily bruise or snuff out. Jesus expressed the gentle compassion Isaiah describes here. With you and with me, Jesus did not come to break; He comes to heal. He did not come to extinguish; He comes to ignite. Jesus conducts His entire ministry with a strong meekness, so much so, that we are rightly surprised at the exceptional times when He does speak harshly in tough love, or when He judges the hypocrisy of religious leadership that imprison people in the name of salvation. And we are surprised because it's not at all the Jesus we're used to. But it's there. We are reminded of how strong and righteous Jesus is. Jesus stared down the false idols of traditional, legalistic religion and gave Himself up to save humankind. He is a new kind of servant. A king who comes to serve, and by serving even unto death He established justice for all the peoples of the earth. He is the fulfillment of this passage. We do not see in this particular song that the Servant is going to suffer. That is coming in the following songs. But Matthew knew that when he identified Jesus with this first song.

The basis for singing that we are getting ready to look at brings up the tension of God working through a conqueror who will demolish, and God working through a Servant who will not break the bruised reed. That tension exists throughout the book of Isaiah. It's one of the major themes. It is represented in our title for this series, King, Servant, Conqueror - our three divisions for Isaiah. The Book of the King established the Messiah as king. We understand the image of king as also conqueror. We are beginning to get a glimpse that this king is also a servant. The Messiah will be both. He will be lion and lamb. That tension is not explained here. It will come into greater focus as we encounter the other Servant songs. For now, it is enough to recognize the tension. The new song follows revelation about a compassionate Servant and is grounded in God's active destruction of evil. That basis for the new song comes in our final verses, 42:13-17. We start in verse 13 by speaking of God in third person. We end in verse 17 by speaking of idols in third person. In between, we hear from God Himself in first person as He declares the deliverance He will provide.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>¹³ The LORD will go forth like a warrior,
He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry.</p> <p>¹⁴ "I have kept silent for a long time,
Now like a woman in labor I will groan,</p> <p>¹⁵ "I will lay waste the mountains and hills
I will make the rivers into coastlands</p> <p>¹⁶ "I will lead the blind by a way they do not know,
I will make darkness into light before them</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><small>These are the things I will do and I</small></p> <p>¹⁷ They will be turned back <i>and</i> be utterly put
to shame,
Who say to molten images,</p> | <p>He will arouse <i>His</i> zeal like a man of war.
He will prevail against His enemies.</p> <p>I have kept still and restrained Myself.
I will both gasp and pant.</p> <p>And wither all their vegetation;
And dry up the ponds.</p> <p>In paths they do not know I will guide them.
And rugged places into plains.</p> <p><small>will not leave them undone."</small></p> <p>Who trust in idols,
"You are our gods."</p> |
|--|---|

The Servant may not cry out, but God will shout. He will shout like a woman about to give labor. There will be silence in the pain, and then suddenly we will hear the cry. God comparing Himself to a woman in labor is certainly a surprising analogy. Let's just except this as the revealed Word of God. So this is Isaiah speaking the image God has given him, and God has given Isaiah an image of Himself as a woman in labor. Jesus will use the same analogy in slightly different way. I know it occurs in different places, but John 16 is one. It is an illustration that everybody can get. Births have happened at home in most places for most of the time. Everybody is familiar with the silent activity that is suddenly punctuated by loud cries, and then followed by new life.

God's cries will precede His wrath against those who have enslaved His people. He will then lead His people; not a strong, good, seeing people, but a blind people who do not know and cannot see. God will lead them to the light. He had challenged idols earlier just to do something, good or evil, do something. They could not. God assures us that He will accomplish His salvation. There may be a long silence leading up to the time of deliverance. But when it is time to come, it will come. God promises. "These are the things I will do and I will not leave them undone." He is not like the idols, who do nothing. He promises He will act.

It may that we are supposed to understand a linear sequence through this passage, that nations are judged for turning from God to false idols. The Servant steps in to accomplish justice in a manner that is faithful and gentle. After the Servant establishes justice for the world, covering God's people, inviting, drawing God's people in, God will finally conquer all evil.

The song concludes by bringing us back to where we started; the hopeless shamefulness of turning from God to false idols that cannot cover our sin, cannot protect us from harm, and cannot fill our hearts.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>¹⁷ They will be turned back <i>and</i> be utterly put
to shame,
Who say to molten images,</p> | <p>Who trust in idols,
"You are our gods."</p> |
|---|--|

Lesson 24 Isaiah 42:18-43:21 Release from Bondage

Introduction

Isaiah							
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."							
Book of the Servant 40-55							
The Redemption of Israel 42:18-44:23							
Release from Bondage 42:18-43:21				Forgiveness of Sins 43:22-44:23			
Israel, the Blind Servant 42:18-25	Disaster Reversed: Israel Redeemed 43:1-7	The Certainty of What the Lord has Promised 43:8-13	Redemption from Babylon: A New Exodus 43:14-21	Sin Exposed 43:22-24	The Past Forgotten, the Future Blessed 43:25-44:5	The Certainty of the Lord's Promise 44:6-20	The Blessedness of Israel in the Redeeming Lord 44:21-23

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

In our last lesson we completed "The Consolation of the World", the first major section of the Book of the Servant. That section concluded with the beautiful poetry of Isaiah 42:1-17. That passage included both the first of four servant songs and the first of three hymns of praise. The Consolation of the World began with God famously exhorting His messengers, "Comfort, O comfort my people." These concluding songs tell us comfort will come through a special servant and will result in shouts of glory to God from the mountaintop. Not only do the servant song and hymn of praise conclude our section on consolation, they also provide a preface for the next major section of the Book of the Servant, titled, "The Redemption of Israel"; a preface, or a transition. The themes at the end of our consolation section flow right into our redemption section. Here are a few quotes from the servant song and the hymn of praise to remind you of the language that we will pick up again in our new section.

We are introduced to the special Servant in 42:1-4. Verse 1,

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>¹ "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
I have put My Spirit upon Him;</p> | <p>My chosen one <i>in whom</i> My soul delights.
He will bring forth justice to the nations.</p> |
|--|---|

Then in verses 6-8, speaking about the Servant.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>⁶ "I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness,
and I will watch over You and I will appoint You</p> <p>⁷ To open blind eyes,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">And those who dwell in darkness from the prison.</p> <p>⁸ "I am the LORD, that is My name;</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Nor My praise to graven images.</p> | <p>I will also hold You by the hand
as a covenant to the people and a light to the
nations,
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon</p> <p>I will not give My glory to another,
I will not leave them undone."</p> <p>Who trust in idols,
"You are our gods."</p> |
|--|---|

The introduction of the Servant is followed by the hymn of praise in 42:10-17. Verses 16-17,

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>¹⁰ Sing to the LORD a new song,
You who go down to the sea, and all that is in it.</p> <p>¹⁶ "I will lead the blind by a way they do not know,
I will make darkness into light before them</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">These are the things I will do and I will not leave them undone."</p> <p>¹⁷ They will be turned back <i>and</i> be utterly put
to shame,
Who say to molten images,</p> | <p><i>Sing</i> His praise from the end of the earth!
You islands, and those who dwell on them.
In paths they do not know I will guide them.
And rugged places into plains.</p> <p>Who trust in idols,
"You are our gods."</p> |
|--|---|

Much of this language - Servant, chosen, Spirit, covenant, blind, prisoners, my name, my glory, graven images, praise, shame, and idols – is all going to reappear in this next section that we're just starting: Isaiah 42:18-44:23. It is the section that Motyer calls, "The Redemption of Israel." Looking even further ahead, after that section, all this language will set us up for the final two major sections

of the Book of the Servant, two sections on deliverance that Motyer calls, “The Great Deliverance,” and, “The Greater Deliverance.”

This idea of double deliverance was already introduced in our first section, the Consolation of the World. We see it in the two reasons for comfort. The people are going to need comforting because they are going into exile. They are also going to need comforting because they are a sinful people who brought God’s wrath onto their own heads. Moving into this present second section, those same two ideas are going to make up to subsections. We are calling this, “The Redemption of Israel.” Well, redemption from what? First, Israel needs to be redeemed from captivity in Babylon. That is not going to be enough to restore or guarantee relationship with God. They are going to need redemption from sin. Isaiah gives us a double need for comfort in the first section, a double need for redemption in the second section, and then when he describes the double deliverance, he is not going to do it in one section; he is going to expand those two ideas out and give each gets its own section, the Great Deliverance, and, the Greater Deliverance. The two halves of our present section are pointing us ahead to those two concluding sections of the Book of the Servant.

This development of themes through restatement is integral to Isaiah’s style. At the most detailed level of verse and verset, this is a hallmark of all Hebrew poetry. Parallel versets that appear synonymous almost never are. The restatement of a theme is not saying the exact same thing. The restatement of a theme in a second verset almost always adds more to the picture, heightening, intensifying, or developing the idea that was presented in the first verset.

That’s the most detailed level where we see this development through restatement. We see that kind of development through restated themes at every level in Isaiah. So, to go to the highest level of structure, we divided Isaiah into three books, the Book of the King, the Book of the Servant, the Book of the Conqueror. Isaiah introduces themes in one book that he later develops in the next book. For example, he declared very early on in the Book of the King that Judah’s sin would be dealt with, “though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow (1:18).” And we got a picture of atonement in 6:7, when the angel touched a burning coal to Isaiah’s lips to forgive his sin. But Isaiah’s focus in that book was the King. You know, the coming child. We need an ideal King, because the bad kings of Israel and the good kings of Israel just aren’t cutting it. So we have this introduction of a theme of atonement, but Isaiah gives no explanation to how Israelites are going to be washed clean or how Isaiah’s sin was burned away. He is building up to address the “how” of atonement by the end of the Book of the Servant.

That’s an example of introducing themes and restating them for development at the highest level, you know, between the books of Isaiah. Isaiah introduces (and later develops) themes at every level, not just from book to book, but section to section, sub-section to sub-section, passage to passage, verse to verse, verset to verset. Our current section, the redemption of Israel, is a fantastic example of this style.

We are going to have two subsections to the Redemption of Israel. Motyer calls the first, “Release from Bondage,” and the second, “Forgiveness of Sin.” And I’ve already said how these two sub-sections are going to get picked up for later development in the Great Deliverance and the Greater Deliverance. As we focus in on the sub-sections, we are going to see a lot of restatement and development. The sub-sections have parallel structures. So, each contains four passages, and those four passages match each other. So, in the first half and the second half we’ll follow the structure.

First, we encounter the sin of Israel.

Second, God promises salvation.

Third, God declares His uniqueness in contrast to false gods,

And fourth, God describes the salvation He has promised.

And in this, we are going to see the repetition of themes such as glory, redemption, blindness, knowledge, Servant, witness, water, and fire. All that language is going to be repeated in each sub-

section. It's not all going to be the same thing; it's going to be developed. And as we do this, we will encounter three meta-themes that we already encountered in the Consolation of the World section. First, the theme that God is unique. He is incomparable. Isaiah develops this theme both by lifting up God's character and actions, and also unmasking the impotence of false gods. God stands apart. He is unique.

Second, God saves His people. God saves His people from physical calamity. He also saves His people from spiritual bondage.

Third, God works through His servant. In our present section, God does all the action Himself. Only Israel is identified as servant. We're not looking at the special Servant that we're going to see later. Israel's one job in this section is to witness to the saving character and action of God. So those themes especially, those two themes will be developed through these four passages.

I am going to make sure I get through the four passages of the first half of the Redemption of Israel in this lesson, and then the four parallel passages of the second half of the Redemption of Israel in the next lesson. And I'm going to do that so we can be sure to keep in mind these that Isaiah is developing through repetition.

Ok. So, now we are ready for the first half of the redemption of Israel which we're calling, "Release From Bondage." This is Isaiah 42:18-43:21. We start with our first of our passages, the sin of Israel in 42:18-25. I'm not going to read all at once. I'm going to comment on this first passage as I go. We start with verses 18-20.

Israel, the Blind Servant (42:18-25)

¹⁸ Hear, you deaf!	And look, you blind, that you may see.
¹⁹ Who is blind but My servant, Who is so blind as he that is at peace <i>with Me</i> ,	Or so deaf as My messenger whom I send? Or so blind as the servant of the LORD?
²⁰ You have seen many things, but you do not observe <i>them</i> ;	<i>Your</i> ears are open, but none hears.

Now, this is ironic: a blind and deaf messenger. Not the best messenger. This blind and deaf servant is not, of course, the ideal Servant of the Servant songs. This is Israel as God's servant. They "have seen many things but do not observe them." Their "ears are open, but none hears." We've seen this motif through Isaiah, starting back in chapter 6 when God originally called Isaiah. He was sent to a people who "keep on listening, but do not perceive, keep on looking, but do not understand." They are deaf and blind. It is a description of Israel's spiritual state.

There is another connection here to chapter 6. When God called Isaiah, he asked, "Who shall I send?" Isaiah answered, "Here am I, send me." Speaking collectively of Israel here, God asks, "Who is so deaf as my messenger whom I send?" All of Israel is supposed to be a messenger to God, not just Isaiah. Isaiah is a special messenger. But the people are deaf and blind. How can deaf and blind people be a useful messenger?

In the next two verses, Isaiah contrasts the Lord's purpose for Israel with the failure of the nation to embrace that purpose.

²¹ The LORD was pleased for His righteousness' sake	To make the law great and glorious.
²² But this is a people plundered and despoiled;	All of them are trapped in caves, Or are hidden away in prisons;
They have become a prey with none to deliver them	And a spoil, with none to say, "Give <i>them</i> back!"

What happened? The Law is supposed to be great and glorious. But this people, they are hiding in caves. They're trapped in prisons. There is something wrong here. To be faithful messengers, the people of Israel needed to embrace and live out the Word of God themselves. Moses explained that purpose of the Law in Deuteronomy 4:5-7.

See (*he tells them to see something they don't see anymore*), just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?

By following God's law, Israel would become a model society: a good, just, secure, God-honoring, prosperous people. Their entire society would serve as a messenger to the nations, declaring the goodness and glory of God. That vision of Israel is not this Israel we're reading about. This Israel is plundered, hiding in caves, cast into prison. How so? That's the question Isaiah next asks in verses 23-24,

<p>²³ Who among you will give ear to this? ²⁴ Who gave Jacob up for spoil,</p>	<p>Who will give heed and listen hereafter? and Israel to plunderers?</p>
---	--

That's the question. Who gave Israel up to her enemies? How is this? Here is the answer.

Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned, And in whose ways they were not willing to walk,
And whose law they did not obey?

<p>²⁵ So He poured out on him the heat of His anger And it set him aflame all around, yet he did not recognize <i>it</i>;</p>	<p>And the fierceness of battle; And it burned him, but he paid no attention.</p>
--	--

God gave Israel up. They rejected Him. They rejected His morality. Relationship with God is broken. His protection is removed. Jerusalem is in flame and the people, they don't even understand why. They are so far from God that they don't even get His discipline. The fire here is set by a conquering army, but the ultimate cause is God. This is His wrath. As a result of Israel's sin, God has poured out on His servant the heat of His anger.

God's wrath is a right response to Israel's sin. And if they recognized it, they could turn and repent. But these don't even recognize it. In His love and mercy, God also promises salvation. This is our second passage, Isaiah 43:1-7. It is a lovely passage. I need to read it all the way through before commenting.

Disaster Reversed: Israel Redeemed (43:1-7)

<p>¹ But now, thus says the LORD, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; ² "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, ³ "For I am the LORD your God, I have given Egypt as your ransom, ⁴ "Since you are precious in My sight, I will give <i>other</i> men in your place ⁵ "Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, ⁶ "I will say to the north, 'Give <i>them</i> up!' Bring My sons from afar ⁷ Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have formed, even whom I have made."</p>	<p>Your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, I have called you by name; you are Mine! And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. Nor will the flame burn you. The Holy One of Israel, your Savior; Cush and Seba in your place. <i>Since</i> you are honored and I love you, and <i>other</i> peoples in exchange for your life. And gather you from the west. And to the south, 'Do not hold <i>them</i> back.' And My daughters from the ends of the earth, And whom I have created for My glory,</p>
---	--

Whew, that's good! That's good!

<p>¹ But now, thus says the LORD, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;</p>	<p>Your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, I have called you by name; you are Mine!</p>
--	---

Who is God talking to? He is talking to blind and deaf Israel. He is talking to the servant who has turned away from Him, who has been unfaithful, who He Himself has sent into exile. I so much want to take this passage and apply it to myself. I want to hear God saying to me,

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed [you Michael]; I have called you by name; you are Mine!
² “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you.

I want that to be about me, about my redemption from sin, about God knowing my name, about God claiming me for Himself. I want it to be an assurance to me, that know matter what waters I must cross or fires I must pass through, God will hold onto me. He will protect me. And I may get to the point where I am able to apply this passage to me. And I believe these truths do apply to me and Christ. But to apply this passage to ourselves, we have to do it indirectly from the original intention of this passage. This was not originally written for us. This was written for Israel. And we still have to ask, redeemed from what? Passing through what waters? What fire?

So thinking about the original meaning in the original context, what does verse 2a remind you of?

² “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.

What could Isaiah be thinking of when he talks about passing through the water? How about rivers not overflowing you? What does that mean? What does that refer to?

And then think about the parallel 2b.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you.

What fire? What flame would Israel fear? Let’s read a little more. Verses 3-5a.

³ “For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place.
⁴ “Since you are precious in My sight, Since you are honored and I love you,
I will give *other* men in your place and *other* peoples in exchange for your life.
⁵ “Do not fear, for I am with you;

Now what could that mean? Egypt as your ransom? Cush and Seba in your place? For the current poetic purpose Egypt, Cush and Seba are all basically the same place: greater Egypt, including the whole of the upper and lower Nile. Why bring Egypt into this passage? How can Egypt ransom Israel? How can Cush take Israel’s place?

When we think of redemption, we think of the Biblical concept of being bought back or being ransomed. As Christians, our minds immediately jump to Jesus. We know that Jesus became our ransom. He was the price paid to redeem us out of our bondage to sin. He took our place. That’s the point of the cross. I deserve to die for my sins. That is the price on my head. That is the right penalty. We all do. Jesus paid that penalty. Jesus gave His life in exchange for our lives. That’s the Gospel. Jesus paid the ransom. He Himself is the ransom.

But how can Egypt ransom Israel, or Cush take her place? How can peoples be given in exchange for the life of Israel? That does not make sense. At least, it does not make sense as a parallel to redemption for sin. Egypt, Cush, all the peoples have to pay for their own sins. They cannot take Israel’s place. Only a sinless man can do that. Only Jesus. This must be something else. Some other kind of redemption must be in mind here.

5b-7 lets us know what kind of redemption we are talking about.

I will bring your offspring from the east, And gather you from the west.
⁶ “I will say to the north, ‘Give *them* up!’ And to the south, ‘Do not hold *them* back.’

Bring My sons from afar
7 Everyone who is called by My name,
Whom I have formed, even whom I have made.”
And My daughters from the ends of the earth,
And whom I have created for My glory,

When will God bring the offspring of Israel from the east and gather them from the west, calling to north and south, “Give them back”? This is the return from the Babylonian exile. The greater number of Jews from Judea were carried off to Babylon in the northeast. Some fled to Egypt. In reality, Jews fled in all directions. God is calling them home.

Going back to the earlier question, when you read verse 2, what do you think of?

2 “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched,
And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.
Nor will the flame burn you.

I think there are three interconnected references here. “Passing through the waters” makes me think of Moses leading Israel through the Red Sea. The reference to Egypt in verse 3 enhances that connection. But the “rivers overflowing” takes me back to Isaiah 8 and the image of Assyria as the mighty Euphrates River overflowing into Judah. To understand the fire reference, we just have to go back to the end of the previous passage describing Israel’s sin and God’s wrath. This is 42:25,

25 So He poured out on him the heat of His anger
And it set him aflame all around, yet he did not recognize it;
And the fierceness of battle;
And it burned him, but he paid no attention.

The fire is the wrath of God, unleashed by a conquering army. These images all intersect. Reference to Egypt reminds us of Israel’s bondage and the Exodus that followed. God called His people out of slavery. That’s going to happen again. God is going to call a future people, exiled to Babylon, out of their bondage. Why are they in bondage? They were taken away as a result of God’s burning anger against their sin. According to 42:25a, that heat of that anger is the fierceness of battle. The conquering army that will set fire to Israel’s cities is the agent of God’s wrath. They will carry the people of Israel off.

But God has not forgotten Israel. He will redeem them. So, the first meaning of passing through the water and through the fire is the metaphor of the exodus out of Egypt. But we see that it’s speaking about something in the future. So that’s one meaning in the past that’s looking ahead to the future as a metaphor: now we can think about that double meaning for the future. God has not forgotten Israel. He will redeem them. We can imagine passing through water and fire in two ways, both in a calamity that will surely come and some will survive, and also in calamity that is going to be avoided as God brings them back. One generation will pass through great suffering in the days of their exile, and yet, they will not be totally destroyed. Many will indeed die, but as a nation they will survive. They will pass through water. They will pass through fire. They will not all die. And even though their suffering is self-inflicted, God promises, “You are mine. I will be with you. You are precious in my sight. I have redeemed you. I will bring your offspring back.” Notice that last promise. “I will bring your offspring back.” So, the prophecy here is not that this generation will not go into exile. They have to pass through water and fire. There will be a future offspring that will be redeemed out of that bondage. That promise of national redemption is for the offspring that will one day return to Israel when God’s timing is right. So here’s this other meaning of the water and fire. That generation will not be stopped by sea or river, and will not be consumed by the fire of a vengeful army. I think that’s the primary meaning of the text. You know, there is the water and fire with the metaphor coming out of Egypt, and then there’s the water and fire that happens to the generation that is exiled, but I think what is being promised here is the coming back, and water and fire not being able to stop this generation. “I will take them through the Red Sea or across the river, and there will be no vengeful army ready to consume them.” He will bring them home.

Okay, so in this passage the context of redemption is not redemption from the spiritual bondage of sin. This is a promise of future national redemption from exile that is, in a way, similar to the former national redemption of the exodus from Egypt.

So, in our first passage, Isaiah described the sin of Israel. In this second passage, God promised salvation from exile in Babylon. In the third passage, God will declare His uniqueness. And it is His uniqueness as the one true God that guarantees this promise of redemption. This is 43:8-13. It is a courtroom scene.

The Certainty of What the Lord has Promised (43:8-13)

<p>⁸ Bring out the people who are blind, even though they have eyes,</p> <p>⁹ All the nations have gathered together Who among them can declare this Let them present their witnesses that they may be justified,</p> <p>¹⁰ "You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, So that you may know and believe Me Before Me there was no God formed,</p> <p>¹¹ "I, even I, am the LORD,</p> <p>¹² "It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed, So you are My witnesses," declares the LORD,</p> <p>¹³ "Even from eternity I am He,</p>	<p>And the deaf, even though they have ears.</p> <p>So that the peoples may be assembled. And proclaim to us the former things? Or let them hear and say, "It is true."</p> <p>"And My servant whom I have chosen, And understand that I am He. And there will be none after Me. And there is no savior besides Me. And there was no strange <i>god</i> among you;</p> <p>And I am God. And there is none who can deliver out of My hand;</p> <p>I act and who can reverse it?"</p>
---	---

God calls for the nation of Israel to be brought out in this court scene.

<p>⁸ Bring out the people who are blind, even though they have eyes,</p>	<p>And the deaf, even though they have ears.</p>
---	--

My first thought in bringing Israel out is that they are being brought out for judgement. Surprisingly thought, they are not brought out as the one on trial. They are brought out as the witnesses! And that's a bit shocking, because they are described to the court as blind and deaf, which are two qualities that, usually, do not commend a person as a good witness. Here is the witness for the prosecution. He can't see, and he can't hear. But he is the witness. Even so, God calls them and charges them to speak.

<p>⁹ All the nations have gathered together Who among them can declare this Let them present their witnesses that they may be justified,</p>	<p>So that the peoples may be assembled. And proclaim to us the former things? Or let them hear and say, "It is true."</p>
---	--

Israel is to proclaim to the gathered nations "the former things." They have been practicing the Passover almost a thousand years. So, they have been celebrating the reality of redemption from Egypt. "The former things." They can give witness to that. Looking forward to future redemption, they can give witness to what God has done in the past. These blind and deaf witnesses are not called to give testimony only for the sake of the gathered nations. They need to give witness to the truth, so that they themselves will remember their God. Verse 10 begins,

<p>¹⁰ "You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, So that you may know and believe Me</p>	<p>"And My servant whom I have chosen, And understand that I am He.</p>
---	---

Connecting to the language of the blind in Isaiah, there is also the blind man in John 9. And I love how he frames his witness to the Jewish Council. He simply says what happened. They want him to

say that Jesus is a sinner. He says, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." - John 9:25. When Jesus later found the blind man, that man followed Jesus' lead into deeper truth. He ends up worshipping Jesus. John the Baptist, Andrew, Phillip, Nathaniel, the Samaritan woman, Peter the blind man, Martha and Mary, Mary Magdalene. They all communicate truth about Jesus in the Gospel of John. They say what they know. And that is part of their process of moving deeper into understanding who Jesus is. You don't give witness because you already understand. You just begin to give witness to what you do know and believe. And he uses similar language to what we described in Isaiah 43:10. Speaking to the Father, Jesus says, "Now they have come to know that everything you have given me is from you. For the words that you gave me, I have given to them, and they received them and, truly, understood that I came forth from you." They are no longer blind and deaf - or, not completely blind and deaf. They have come to truly know God; to believe; to understand. Not in full, of course. But that's part of the joy in being in relationship with God. There is always more to learn about His glory and about His goodness. And it's part of being free in our witness. You are not expected to know it all or to get it right. You don't have to answer every skeptical question. You say what you do know. You say what you do believe. And you don't have to - please, don't overstate it! Don't make it more than it is. Everything doesn't have to sound good and right. There are problems that we don't have to answer. God's got that. We just say what we know, what we believe, what we have seen, what's happened to us.

Back to Isaiah 43:9-10a,

⁹ All the nations have gathered together Who among them can declare this Let them present their witnesses that they may be justified,	So that the peoples may be assembled. And proclaim to us the former things? Or let them hear and say, "It is true."
---	---

¹⁰ "You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, So that you may know and believe Me	"And My servant whom I have chosen, And understand that I am He.
---	---

God is calling Israel to witness. They don't even have to come up with it. He says, "Let them hear and say it is true." They can even listen to what the truth is spoken and say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's what I believe. I agree with that." God wants them to witness so that they will remember what they do know and enter more deeply into knowledge of who God is. And this is the truth they are supposed to give witness to. This is verses 10c-13. So let's practice this. He says, "Let them hear and say it is true." I'm going to read this, 10c-13, and you hear it and you says if it's true. Do you stand up and give witness to this? Is this what you believe?

Before Me there was no God formed,	And there will be none after Me.
¹¹ "I, even I, am the LORD,	And there is no savior besides Me.
¹² "It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed, So you are My witnesses," declares the LORD,	And there was no strange <i>god</i> among you; And I am God.
¹³ "Even from eternity I am He,	And there is none who can deliver out of My hand;
I act and who can reverse it?"	

Do you amen that? Do you believe that? Can you hear that and say, "It is true"? God is unique. There is no other God; none before Him, none after. He has declared, He has saved, and He has proclaimed that He will save again. He is from eternity God. I love the second phrase of 13a, "There is none who can deliver out of my hand." Speaking of John, that sounds like John 10:29. This is the God of Israel. This is the God Israel is called to witness to. He is absolutely unique, and He says, "There is no strange god among you!" Because there are no other gods! The gods of the nations are no gods at all. Yahweh is the only true God, and His promise of deliverance is sure.

(They will lie down together *and* not rise again; They have been quenched *and* extinguished
like a wick):

The image of water makes us think of the Red Sea crushing Egypt. The image of flame, that's been mostly connected with the invading army of Babylon. God made a way through the sea for Israel, but the chariot and horse of Egypt was overwhelmed. I'm considering that metaphor just applying to Babylon, "They will lie down together and not rise again." And this last verset emphasizes not the language of water, but the language of fire. "They have been quenched and extinguished like a wick." Who has been extinguished? Babylon, the future conquering army that will set fire to Israel as an agent of God's wrath, will later be snuffed out, extinguished, like two fingers quenching the wick of a lamp.

And notice the interesting language in verses 18 and 19. God called His witnesses to remember the past. He wants them to remember what He did, but He does not want us to get stuck in the past. The past is supposed to teach us, but we are not supposed to live there. The images of Egypt are not about Egypt. That's why he says in 18 and 19,

¹⁸ "Do not call to mind the former things, Or ponder things of the past.
¹⁹ "Behold, I will do something new, Now it will spring forth; Will you not be
aware of it?
I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, Rivers in the desert.

The promises of God are for your generation and the generations that will come. We are not talking about that past deliverance of Egypt. That is a metaphor to help us think about the future. This is God's word for you. God is going to make a new way in the wilderness, not from Egypt north to Israel, but from Babylon south to Israel. And just as He provided water in the wilderness for His people back then, He is going to provide for these future exiles water in the wilderness. Verses 20-21,

²⁰ "The beasts of the field will glorify Me, The jackals and the ostriches,
Because I have given waters in the wilderness And rivers in the desert,
To give drink to My chosen people.
²¹ "The people whom I formed for Myself Will declare My praise.

Conclusion

God is unique. He alone is God. He will punish the sin of His people. Then he will save them from the punishment that His own justice requires. All the positive action in this sub-section is the action of God. Israel negatively sinned. That's not a positive action. Then God exerted His wrath. That's just. God promised redemption. That's merciful. God called for His people. God made a way through the desert. That's grace.

He did call His servant to witness. That is their one positive action. The Israelites are to speak of what they know. They are imperfect witnesses, mostly blind and deaf. But even in their blindness, they can give witness to what they have seen, to what they do know to be true about God, and that's a starting point. That's where they move forward in understanding who God really is. That's God's intention for the people He has called by His name. Our last verse, 43:21,

²¹ "The people whom I formed for Myself Will declare My praise.

Lesson 25 Isaiah 43:22-44:23 Forgiveness of Sins

Introduction

One of the great problems of humanity is that deliverance from outward oppression and suffering does not fix our most sinister problem. The oppressors were crushed under the waters of the Red Sea. Israel came out on the other side free. Miriam's song of triumph should have marked the climax of the Exodus.

I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted;	The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and song,	And He has become my salvation;
This is my God, and I will praise Him;	My father's God, and I will extol Him.

Exodus 15:1-2

But the greater problem was not outside of the Israelites. The more insidious problem is inside. God's people brought sin into the camp. We all bring sin into the camp. In reality, the climax of Exodus occurs after the sin of the golden calf. Israel turns away from the revelation God delivered on Mount Sinai. So, God must turn away from them. His anger burns, like holy fire on a dry bush. Yet, somehow, He makes a way to renew covenant with this sinful people. The climax of the Exodus is the declaration of God's name that He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, and that He will by no means allow the guilty to go unpunished. God will find a way to live in His holiness among a sinful people without burning them up. And that way will be in accord with His just wrath against sin.

Isaiah uses the historical events of the Egyptian exodus as a metaphor to describe a future Babylonian exodus. Just as the redemption of the nation from Egypt did not solve the problem of evil within, so also, redemption of the nation from exile in Babylon is not going to solve the problem of evil within. The problem was not with that one particularly stubborn generation. The problem is with every generation, from Egypt to Babylon to us. The problem is the depravity of the human heart, mind, and body. We all turn away.

There is a double problem, outer oppression and inner oppression. So, the Israelites need a double solution. Isaiah addressed national redemption in our previous lesson. He addresses forgiveness of sin in this lesson. Many of the themes developed in that previous lesson will carry forward into this present one. Indeed, the four-part pattern of that previous sub-section is paralleled here in the present sub-section, in Isaiah 43:22-44:23.

First, the sin of Israel breaks relationship with God.

Second, God promises salvation.

Third, God declares His uniqueness in contrast to false gods.

And fourth, God describes the salvation He has promised.

We begin with Israel's sin exposed in Isaiah 43:22-24.

Sin exposed (43:22-24)

²² "Yet you have not called on Me, O Jacob;	But you have become weary of Me, O Israel.
²³ "You have not brought to Me the sheep of your burnt offerings,	Nor have you honored Me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with offerings,	Nor wearied you with incense.
²⁴ "You have bought Me not sweet cane with money,	Nor have you filled Me with the fat of your sacrifices;
Rather you have burdened Me with your sins,	You have wearied Me with your iniquities.

That's straight to the point. God tells Israel, "You have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities." There are five verses in this passage with two versets each. The five verses are chiasmically arranged. They begin and end with weariness.

Verse 22, the first verse, begins with this complaint against Israel, "You have not called on me." Why have they not called on God? He says, "You have become weary of me." Israel has become apathetic in its relationship with God. How often does that happen in human religion? We have all become weary of religion. Especially when we grow up in it, believing the religion is about us and about what we get out of it. It becomes just a lot of stuff you do: week-end worship, holidays, ritual motions, stand-up, sing, sit-down, pray. We lose active relational conversation with God. We have no emotional connection to God through the week. We don't see life change. And so, God's people become weary of their God.

The two verses of the inner frame give specific examples of Israel's apathy. The heart has gone out of their religious practice. Verse 23a says,

²³ "You have not brought to Me the sheep of your burnt offerings, Nor have you honored Me with your sacrifices.

They don't address the heart problem underlying their religious practice. They don't see fault in themselves. They see fault with the religion. And so they quit doing it. Church has become boring. They are not feeling it, so they just stop going. The parallel verse in 24a repeats this attitude of giving up and gives emphasis to how they should imagine God feeling about their choice to just stop offering sacrifice.

²⁴ "You have bought Me not sweet cane with money, Nor have you filled Me with the fat of your sacrifices;

They have not filled God. They have not provided sweet dessert. That's not literal. Sacrifice is symbolic. God is not really hungry. He does not really have a sweet tooth. God desires a people who love Him. God enjoys the praise of His children. We give up because we don't feel it. That shows how self-centered we humans are in our religious practices. I mean, isn't the main point of worship what God feels? Not what you feel. God is the center. God is the one being honored. Even when we can't come with a joyful and loving heart, God values a contrite heart, a broken heart, a faithful heart. Why is it about what we feel instead of what He feels? What is the point of our religious action?

The central verse is 23b.

I have not burdened you with offerings, Nor wearied you with incense.

If the ritual practices instituted by God seem to us burdensome or wearisome, then ought we not ask, "Why? What is it about my heart? What is it about my practice of these rituals that creates this burden? God did not require ritual sacrifice, whether offerings of food or incense, with the intent that we just suffer through it. The point was not to create a cross for people to have to bear so they could prove their spirituality, however distasteful. You say, "I hate going to church but I go. Therefore I am spiritual." It's not the point. The point was not to be wearisome.

Ritual action is given by God to provide opportunity to relate to Him personally and in community. The examples here are Old Covenant, but the meaning applies just as much to ritual sacrifice as it does to baptism, the Lord's supper, prayer, and songs of worship. Whether the ritual provides an opportunity to express confession, or lament, or honor, the goal is to focus on Him and on our relationship to Him. Whether it's through confession of sin, or lament of our circumstances, or expressing our honor and love, this is a relational opportunity.

So God says in this verse, "I do not burden you. I did not weary you. You have become burdened and wearied because you have distorted in your heart and mind the purpose of the rituals I gave you."

It is important to remember that the reward of religious action is not foremost our own experience of fulfillment, or of peace, of joy. The reward of religious action is God Himself. He is the treasure. I take the opportunity to express my faith, my devotion to Him, and I can do that whether I feel peace and joy in the moment or not. Peace and joy are a right fruit of my relationship with God, an appropriate and desirable outcome of my religious expression. But the emotion is not the goal and is not guaranteed every time I worship. If we focus on how worship benefits us, we will lose that

<p>¹ “But now listen, O Jacob, My servant, ² Thus says the LORD who made you</p> <p>‘Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; ³ ‘For I will pour out water on the thirsty land I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring ⁴ And they will spring up among the grass ⁵ “This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’S’; And another will write on his hand, ‘Belonging to the LORD,’</p>	<p>And Israel, whom I have chosen: And formed you from the womb, who will help you, And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen. And streams on the dry ground; And My blessing on your descendants; Like poplars by streams of water.’ And that one will call on the name of Jacob; And will name Israel’s name with honor.</p>
---	--

God will make a way for forgiveness of sin. The court scene found Israel guilty and decreed punishment. But the first line of this whole passage was, “I will not remember your sins.” That’s the thought that preceded the courtroom scene. It was not an admission of injustice. God does not ignore sin. He is not going to pervert the court. God’s holiness demands that justice be satisfied. He will find a way to satisfy the demands of justice, so that the guilt and damage of sin might be resolved, and then it’s forgotten. It’s not forgotten without being resolved.

We do not know here in Isaiah how that will work. But we do get a hint of something that Isaiah has not yet developed in his prophecy. Included in his promise to deal with Israel’s sin is this promise to pour out the Holy Spirit on Israel. Did you hear that in the text? This is new. It is just a glimpse of God’s future plan to both forgive and to, also, empower His people to move forward in righteousness. He foretold long time ago, through Moses in Deuteronomy 30 that He would do a new work in His people when He brought them back from Exile. That work would be internal, described as a circumcision of the heart. And that work would empower God’s people to love Him with heart, mind, and soul in a way not possible from just depending on their own strength.

I love how Isaiah uses the language of water poured out on the thirsty land to introduce this promise of the Holy Spirit. The image of water connects us back to our previous passage. “Passing through the waters” first reminded us of deliverance from Egypt. But we quickly realized that the Egypt motif was not pointing back to what God had done; it was reminding us of what God had done, so that we might believe in what He was going to do. The new exodus would take Israel, not up through the Red Sea to the Promised Land, but down across the Euphrates river to the Promised Land. It’s not up from Egypt, it’s down from Babylon.

The first use of water imagery promised protection, a passing through the waters. The second use of water imagery in our last passage promised provision. Just as He provided water to Israel through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, so also God promised to provide water through the wilderness from Babylon to Canaan. This promise was in the very last verses of that previous lesson, 43:20-21.

<p>²⁰ “The beasts of the field will glorify Me, Because I have given waters in the wilderness</p>	<p>The jackals and the ostriches, And rivers in the desert, To give drink to My chosen people.</p>
<p>²¹ “The people whom I formed for Myself</p>	<p>Will declare My praise.</p>

National redemption requires water to keep the people going until they reach the Promised Land. And that’s literal water, not spiritual water. But now, in this third use of the water imagery, we see the need for spiritual provision to keep the people going until they reach the Promised Land. The Holy Spirit will be poured out when Israel’s descendants are redeemed from sin.

We also see in this passage that spiritual redemption will result in a transformed sense of identity. Israel is getting a new power. Now through the indwelling Holy Spirit they are also getting a new sense of who they are. Instead of trying to define God and religion with human beings at the center, God’s redeemed people will gain this new spiritual perspective with God as central to their own definition, even of themselves. Verse 5,

⁵ “This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’S’;
And another will write on his hand, ‘Belonging
to the LORD,’
And that one will call on the name of Jacob;
And will name Israel’s name with honor.

Religion had become weary because the point of the ritual had become human-centered. An internal turning of the human heart is necessary to experience the joy of relationship with God. In heart and soul, these people now are going to begin to say, “I am the Lord’s.” They are seeing themselves in a new light. That’s who I am. I am one “Belonging to the Lord.” That reminds me of John who wrote the Gospel of John, of his designation of himself in the Gospel, “the beloved disciple.” Is this who you are? Is that how you define yourself? This is who I am. I am the Lord’s. I am one belonging to the Lord. I am a beloved disciple. With this new identity, the name of Israel is not a name of shame, of a people worn out by their own God and given over to sin. The name of Israel is called on in honor. It’s now a people who know their God, who live to glorify God.

God’s promise of deliverance from sin addresses both the guilt of sin and the power of sin. God will find a way to “remember our sin no more” and He will “pour out his Holy Spirit.” The guilt and the power of sin are defeated. That is the promise.

The Certainty of the Lord’s Promise (44:6-20)

We consider the certainty of that promise in the third passage of this section, in Isaiah 44:6-20. The certainty is established by the character and ability of the One who makes the promise. God is absolutely unique in His character and ability. He stands above. He stands alone. All other options turn out to be a mirage in the desert, holding out a promise of living water that will never ultimately come true. To establish the certainty of God’s word, Isaiah first affirms who God is and then un.masks the alternative. So in this third passage of our lesson, we begin with who God is in the first three verses, Isaiah 44:6-8.

The Uniqueness of Yahweh (6-8)

⁶ “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
‘I am the first and I am the last,
⁷ ‘Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it;
From the time that I established the ancient nation.
And let them declare to them the things that
are coming,
⁸ ‘Do not tremble and do not be afraid;
Is there any God besides Me,
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
And there is no God besides Me.
Yes, let him recount it to Me in order,
And the events that are going to take place.⁵¹
Have I not long since announced it to you
and declared it?
And you are My witnesses.
Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.’ ”

I love that! Right? We start with the absolute uniqueness of God.

⁶ “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
‘I am the first and I am the last,
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
And there is no God besides Me.

We’ve already heard this in Isaiah. “I am the first and I am the last.” It was in 41:4, it’s here in 44:6, it’s going to come again in 48:12. And it’s the same language that appears at the beginning and end of the book of Revelation. This is a theme of Scripture. This is God’s name, “Yahweh, I am. I am the first and I am the last.” The second verset makes clear this is a claim to unique divinity. “There is no God besides Me.” That is a claim of uniqueness, and that uniqueness is made visible to God’s people through the works He has done and through the fulfillment of His promises in the works He will do.
Verse 7,

⁵¹ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1911-1912.

⁷ Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; Yes, let him recount it to Me in order,
From the time that I established the ancient nation.
And let them declare to them the things that are coming, And the events that are going to take place.

As we have seen and will continue to see, fulfillment of His Word is a major aspect of Isaiah's argument that God alone is truly God. And here, together with that theme, we also come back to the theme of the previous lesson that God's people have the responsibility of giving witness to their knowledge and experience of God. That was in verse 8.

⁸ 'Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it?
And you are My witnesses.
Is there any God besides Me, Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.'

This is who we know God to be. He is first and last. He is the only God. He has blessed His people in the past, and He will keep His promises of blessing in the future. He is the Rock upon whom we will build our lives. There is no other. And this is our witness. We are witnesses to the uniqueness of God.

The Absurdity of Idols (9-20)

With that uniqueness established, we are able to believe in the certainty of His promises because of who He is. He is first, He is last, there is no other god. And then, following his previous pattern, Isaiah continues to affirm that uniqueness by denouncing false alternatives and highlighting the uncertainty of trusting any other offer.

So, just as believers in Yahweh are to serve as His witnesses, Isaiah calls believers in false gods to serve as their witnesses. And he is going to ridicule their witness. It is going to be a cutting rebuke. Before I read it, I want to let you know how this critique of idolatry has been viewed in modern Biblical studies.

A common objection of modern scholars is that Isaiah fails to understand pagan idolatry. They say he has missed the point that these idols are merely symbolic representations of the gods they worship, not the gods themselves. That argument is faulty for two reasons. First, it's not that simple. Ancient Near Eastern idolatry did recognize physical idols as a manifestation of the god worshipped. The phenomena is the god. Similar to how a storm was not something a storm god did, but the manifestation of the storm god himself. The god is somehow manifested in its physical representation. The god is not wholly localized. He could be manifested in many idols. But it is also not correct to say the idol was merely a symbolic representation. In critiquing Isaiah, modern scholars using this argument show that they are the ones who fail to understand pagan idolatry. This is a real problem. How can you take a block of wood and them claim that it's actually a manifestation of a god? That was part of the claim.

The argument is faulty for a second reason. Isaiah is not providing here an overly simplistic view of idolatry, so that he can knock it down using a strawman argument. You know, an argument that doesn't really work, but only works on Isaiah's simple presentation of idolatry. That is not what Isaiah is doing. He is intentionally boiling idolatry down to essential elements to show its own inherent absurdity. You might argue that Isaiah is unfair or incorrect in his critique. But at least recognize the strategy he is using. This is not a strawman strategy. To show the absurdity of idolatry is to undermine the entire pagan worldview.

Robert Alter is a professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkley. In my online transcripts of this series, I have been using Alter's translation as the basis for the scanning of the text. That means I am following the way he organizes the poetry into verses and versets. Alter is not a Christian. He does have profound insight into the literary nature of the Old Testament. I am telling you all of this to set up a quote from Alter where he addresses the misconception of another modern Jewish scholar. Here is a paragraph from Alter on how we should view Isaiah's negative view of idol-gods.

The lengthy polemic against the manufacturers of idols that begins with these words is a hallmark of our prophet. No other biblical writer so scathingly reduces paganism to mere absurd fetishism. In the mid-twentieth century, the Israeli Bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufman used such prophecies to argue that the Israelites were so far removed from paganism that they failed to understand that idols were conceived merely as symbols of the gods they represented. One may question that view because polemic or satire is a literary vehicle that thrives on exaggeration: the prophet, in order to show vividly that idolators worship imagined entities, not real gods, represents them absurdly carving gods out of wood, using the leftover wood for fuel, and bowing down to their wooden carvings as to gods.⁵²

Adding to that view, John Oswalt emphasizes the persuasive objective of Isaiah's strategy. Oswalt writes,

Instead of a logically developed summation in which previous points are enumerated, the author paints a detailed picture whereby he appeals to the imagination to drive the final nail of persuasion. Here, when he has finished his sarcastic picture, it is simply unthinkable to compare these gods to God.⁵³

Okay, now we are ready to consider the detailed picture Isaiah paints. Here is his argument, his polemic. Some Bibles print this as prose in paragraph form. Other Bibles scan it as poetry. Alter scans it as poetic verse, so I'm going to read it that way. This is Isaiah 44:9-20,

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>⁹ Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile,
even their own witnesses fail to see</p> <p>¹⁰ Who has fashioned a god or cast an idol</p> <p>¹¹ Behold, all his companions will be put to shame,
Let them all assemble themselves, let them stand up,</p> <p>¹² The man shapes iron into a cutting tool
fashioning it with hammers.
He also gets hungry and his strength fails;</p> <p>¹³ Another shapes wood,
he outlines it with red chalk.</p> <p>and makes it like the form of a man,</p> <p>¹⁴ Surely he cuts cedars for himself,
and raises it for himself among the trees of the forest.</p> <p>¹⁵ Then it becomes something for a man to burn,
he also makes a fire</p> <p>He also makes a god and worships it;</p> <p>¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire;</p> <p>He also warms himself and says, "Aha!</p> <p>¹⁷ But the rest of it he makes into a god, his
his graven image.
he also prays to it and says,</p> | <p>and their precious things are of no profit;
or know, so that they will be put to shame.
to no profit?
for the craftsmen themselves are mere men.
let them tremble, let them together be put to shame.
and does his work over the coals,
and working it with his strong arm.
he drinks no water and becomes weary.
he extends a measuring line;
He works it with planes and outlines it with a compass,
like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house.
and takes a cypress or an oak
He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow.
so he takes one of them and warms himself;
to bake bread.
he makes it a graven image and falls down before it.
over this half he eats meat as he roasts a roast
and is satisfied.
I am warm, I have seen the fire."
He falls down before it and worships;
"Deliver me, for you are my god."</p> |
|---|---|

⁵² Alter, 1916.

⁵³ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 171.

Thus the Achilles' heel of all paganism is idol making. If it can be shown, as Isaiah does, that it is folly to believe that supreme power resides in a block of wood that was a tree until someone cut it down and with great effort made it into a god, then a deathblow has been struck at the root of paganism. If the gods are coterminous with this world, as idol making demonstrates, then it is folly to think that they can radically reshape the world according to some transcendent purpose. They are blind, deaf, and dumb, locked into the cycles of nature, and those who worship them reduce themselves to nothing, meaningless blobs of protoplasm, which live, propagate, and die, all to no end.⁵⁴

Understanding the ancient pagan view helps us understand Isaiah's denouncement of the false gods that Israelites and all the surrounding nations turned to. But how is that denouncement relevant to us in our modern context? We're not tempted to turn from God to idols made of wood. Are we?

Well, maybe not idols made of wood. But human beings have never stopped looking for solutions to the deepest needs of heart and soul in the things they themselves have created from what is already present in the universe. So it would do us well to ask, what did the ancients seek to gain from their idols? Can we relate to that? Well, we can boil most of it down to these four longings. A longing for control over life's circumstances; a longing for pleasure; a longing for identity; and a longing to worship.

How modern does that sound? A longing to control circumstances, to make things work out for you and loved ones? Is that modern? How about, a longing to experience pleasure? Yes, that's modern. A longing for identity, to know who you are, to belong, to have value? That certainly sounds modern enough! And I believe the longing to worship fits right along with modern desires. I'll come back to that one in a moment.

What, then, are our gods? What do we call on to help us satisfy these basic longings? Even if we are no longer calling them gods or no longer make physical representations of them, what idols of the heart do the modern people seek out to meet the desire for control, for pleasure, for identity, for worship?

For example, what are we seeking when we make a particular relationship central to life? What are all the love songs about? What do we seek when we make money a primary goal? What are we looking for in vocational success? Why do we value our educational accomplishments? What do we want from adventure or entertainment? What do we want from a toned down, culturally appropriate religion?

I'd say it all boils down to the same thing. We either want control, some kind of power that will enable us to manipulate life's outcomes, so that we can attain stability or secure blessing or avoid calamity; or we want pleasure, whether the pleasure of adventure, or the pleasure of relaxation, or the pleasure of sex, or the pleasure of escape. Or we want identity. We want to define ourselves in a way that enables us to belong and to have value. Or we want to worship. That's a need in the human heart not always clearly defined, but it is always there. Whether we worship a sports team, an actor, a singer, an influencer, a man, a woman, our children, mother earth, the one power, the stars - we want to recognize something beyond ourselves to fill a gap inside. And this is linked together with our desire for identity and belonging, this need to worship something more than us.

These four things, probably more, but at least these four things: control, pleasure, identity, and worship - that's what we want deep inside. And that's why we fashion our own idols out of what we see around us: relationships, money, success, entertainment. We are trying to fulfill these deeper longings. And just as naturally as the ancients, our sin nature urges us to turn away from the One true God as the source of these longings. We turn from Him to the creation and to our own definitions of life. The problem is not the base desires. The problem is that we have twisted imaginings of what we want and have given up on the one true source that can fulfill what we most desperately want.

⁵⁴ Oswalt 174–176.

God offers to meet those needs for us. This desire for control, God says, “Place yourself in my hands and trust in my sovereignty.” Pleasure - we find that foremost in your love for God and in the things He has given us to enjoy. Identity - it does not come from what we have made, it does not come outside ourselves. It comes from belonging to God. And this desire to worship, this desire to belong to something greater than ourselves, that certainly is met in our praise of the One true God. And when we stop trying to define Him and we trust Him to define us, we begin to move towards the satisfaction of our souls.

<p>⁵ “This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’S’; And another will write on his hand, ‘Belonging to the LORD,’</p>	<p>And that one will call on the name of Jacob; And will name Israel’s name with honor.</p>
---	--

There is no Rock, there is no salvation apart from Him. Jesus will later say in John 14:6,

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

Does that sound exclusive? Like God is the only way to truly meet our needs? Well, it should be, because it is. It must be. God says,

I am the first and I am the last,	And there is no God besides Me.
-----------------------------------	---------------------------------

We were created to find completion in the God who is. There is no other. Salvation, life, fulfillment are only in Him. Apart from Him, we are left to the impossible task of filling ourselves with impotent gods of our own imaginings. And it just won’t work. They are empty cisterns. They cannot provide us the water of life.

We’ve completed three of four passages. First, we recognized Israel’s sin of turning away from relationship with God. They became weary of their Creator. Second, we heard God’s promise to forgive. Third, that promise was made certain through the absolute uniqueness of the One who promised. Now, we conclude in our fourth passage with a short description of the promised salvation.

The Blessedness of Israel in the Redeeming Lord (44:21-23)

This conclusion is a hymn of praise. It is the second of three such hymns in the Book of the Servant. The first concluded our major section the Consolation of the World. This one is concluding our major section on the Redemption of Israel. This is Isaiah 44:21-23.

<p>²¹ “Remember these things, O Jacob, I have formed you, you are My servant, ²² “I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud,</p>	<p>And Israel, for you are My servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me. And your sins like a heavy mist.</p>
---	--

Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.”

<p>²³ Shout for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done it! Break forth into a shout of joy, you mountains, For the LORD has redeemed Jacob</p>	<p>Shout joyfully, you lower parts of the earth; O forest, and every tree in it; And in Israel He shows forth His glory.</p>
--	--

How should we respond to God’s promise of redemption? Imagine walking through a valley consumed by heavy fog. Deathly air makes your skin feel clammy and cold. You can see your feet shuffling along, but that is all. You see nothing ahead and nothing behind. You are covered with a deathly shroud. In a moment the cloud dissipates, the sun burns away the mist.

<p>²² “I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud,</p>	<p>And your sins like a heavy mist.</p>
---	---

Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.”

How should we respond to that? Shouts of joy resound through the forest and break forth on every mountain top. Isaiah pictures creation singing. Paul writes in Romans 8:19, “the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.” Well, this is Isaiah writing about when that redemption is accomplished!

²³ Shout for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done it! Shout joyfully, you lower parts of the earth;
Break forth into a shout of joy, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it;
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob And in Israel He shows forth His glory.

“The Lord has done it!” The creation is not the source of redemption. God is the source. God is the center. The creation exists to display, and manifest, and rejoice in the glory of its creator. That glory is supremely displayed through God’s unflinching justice and incomparable grace. He makes a way for a sinful people to live in fellowship with a holy God. What’s the right response to that? A song of joy!

Lesson 26 Isaiah 44:24-45:8 The Cyrus Prophecy and Historical Background

Introduction

We have just completed the second major section of the Book of the Servant titled, “The Redemption of Israel.” That section set us up for the remaining two sections of the Book of the Servant, “The Great Deliverance,” and, “The Greater Deliverance.” I’ll set up the structure for the Great Deliverance in our next lesson.

In this lesson we are giving our full attention to one of the most astounding prophecies in Scripture, comparable in its specificity and unlikeliness only to some of the more detailed prophecies about Jesus Christ. Concerning specificity, this prophecy gives us a name that no one had ever heard of. God’s shepherd will be named, “Cyrus.” That’s pretty specific. Concerning unlikeliness, the name belongs to a people on nobody’s radar. Isaiah has already stretched the imagination of his readers by prophesying the rise of Babylon over Assyria. As unlikely as that might be, at least his readers were very familiar with the name of Babylon, and even the concept of Babylon as a powerful empire that might conceivably rule over Judah. It is not likely. Babylon had not ruled an empire for a thousand years, since the time of Hammurabi. But at least Babylon is part of the cultural imagination.

In 700 BC, nobody in this region knows anything about Persia. They are not a player. They are insignificant tribes north and east of Mesopotamia. And if we don’t know anything about Persia, how in the world could we be expected to know anything about the future leader who is going to bring to meld the Persian tribes together and conquer the world?

It is such an unthinkable claim that scholars assume this part of the book cannot be original to the prophet Isaiah. How could he look ahead 150 years to prophesy about a Babylonian Empire, not yet in existence, being conquered by another empire of an unknown people led by an unknown king?

I’ll address this prophecy from two perspectives. First, I want to provide some historical context. I’ve done that a couple of times in this Isaiah series. We did it in the very first lesson, addressing Isaiah 1:1-2, and then again in lesson 17, addressing chapters 36-39. This will be our third history-heavy episode. After considering the historical context, we will then consider the meaning of the text. So, we’ll come from both perspectives.

Before addressing the history, let’s read the text, so we have the prophecy in mind. Our text is Isaiah 44:24-45:8. It is just 13 verses separated into two halves with God first speaking to Judah and then speaking to Cyrus. We start in the first 5 verses with God’s message to Judah. The message assumes that Jerusalem has been destroyed and most of the people taken off into exile. So, this is looking ahead 150 years. As we read, notice how the text starts by contrasting God’s ability to guarantee His word against the deficiencies of human diviners and soothsayers.

The Historical Context

The Prophetic Text (44:24–45:8)

- | | |
|--|---|
| ²⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, | and the one who formed you from the womb, |
| “I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, | Stretching out the heavens by Myself |
| | And spreading out the earth all alone, |
| ²⁵ Causing the omens of boasters to fail, | Making fools out of diviners, |
| Causing wise men to draw back | And turning their knowledge into foolishness, |
| ²⁶ Confirming the word of His servant | And performing the purpose of His messengers. |

Now with that contrast in mind – the false diviners vs. God’s true messengers - God gives us His message. And notice how the text builds towards Cyrus and the task he is to perform.

It is I who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited!’ And of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built.’
And I will raise up her ruins again.

- ²⁷ “It is I who says to the depth of the sea, ‘Be dried up!’ And I will make your rivers dry.
²⁸ “It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.’
And he declares of Jerusalem, ‘She will be built,’ And of the temple, ‘Your foundation will be laid.’ ”

The next 8 verses are a word from God to the future king Cyrus, beginning with what God will do and ending with who God is.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed,
To subdue nations before him
To open doors before him</p> <p>² "I will go before you
I will shatter the doors of bronze</p> <p>³ "I will give you the treasures of darkness
So that you may know that it is I,</p> <p>⁴ "For the sake of Jacob My servant,
I have also called you by your name;</p> <p>⁵ "I am the LORD, and there is no other;
I will gird you,</p> <p>⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting
of the sun</p> <p>⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness,
I am the LORD who does all these.</p> <p>⁸ "Drip down, O heavens, from above,
Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit,
I, the LORD, have created it.</p> | <p>Whom I have taken by the right hand,
And to loose the loins of kings;
so that gates will not be shut:
and make the rough places smooth;
and cut through their iron bars.
And hidden wealth of secret places,
The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by
your name.
And Israel My chosen one,
I have given you a title of honor
Though you have not known Me.
Besides Me there is no God.
though you have not known Me;
That there is no one besides Me.</p> <p>I am the LORD, and there is no other,
Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.
And let the clouds pour down righteousness;
And righteousness spring up with it.</p> |
|--|---|

The Historic Context

The name "Cyrus" appears 15 times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew pronunciation is, "Koresh." My Iranian friend Donya wrote the Persian script for Cyrus' name in my Bible here at this verse, at 44:28, and told me to pronounce it as, "Koorosh." I really should have. My friends Donya and Shayan who speak Persian, who are Persian, teach about Cyrus. I'm going to do my best. For a long time I have thought that the country name "Iran" is a more modern designation. I tend to connect Iran with Islam, and Persia with the more ancient religion of Zoroastrianism and the whole empire in the Bible. I've recently learned that Persia and Iran are both names used from ancient times for the same people and same geographic territory. Persian and Iranian can be interchangeable.

With the conquest of Cyrus and the rise of Persian Empire, Persian culture became a major influencer in the ancient Near East, I think we can say, for the past 2500 years, from then to today. The Mesopotamian empires prior to Persia maintained a continuity of culture no matter who happened to be governing the territory, whether Assyrian, or Babylonian, or Semite tribes who took on the Assyrian and Babylonian mantels. Whoever conquered was consistently conquered themselves by the Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia. For almost 3000 years, even when everyone was speaking the Semite trade language Aramaic, the elite classes were still using the Sumerian language, and the culture still had this Sumerian flavor to it.

The Persian conquest broke that chain of continuity. Persian became the language of the elite. Rather than adopt the culture of the conquered, Persia dominated both politically and culturally. A later example of Persian cultural dominance is seen at the end of the first Persian dynasty, when the conqueror Alexander the Great invades. A point of contention between Alexander and his Macedonians arose as Alexander adopted Persian titles and Persian practices. So, rather than imposing Macedonian or Greek culture on the Persians Alexander was overcome himself by Persian culture. Persian cultural influence stretched west to east: from Rome and beyond in the west, to China in the east, and north to south from the Asian steppes down to Egypt.

This future of Persia with her might and her influence was clearly seen in the mind of God. It was totally unseeable in the mind of any man. Nobody in Isaiah's date would have considered a tribe

from Persia an option to rule in Mesopotamia. It's unthinkable. Throughout Biblical history, there is always at least one superpower to the north and a superpower to the south. Egypt always holds the southern superpower position. So if you're wondering who is ruling below Israel in the Bible, it's Egypt. To the north, the superpower changes from time to time. We get some mention of the Hittites back in Moses' day, then later, during the time of the divided kingdom, we encounter the neo-Assyrians, followed by the neo-Babylonians, followed by the Persians. They are called neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian because they are the latest version of these empires. The older versions existed in the time of Abraham, Moses, and the Judges, but Assyria and Babylonia do not show up significantly in the Biblical story until the later prophets.

To keep things simple, we will drop the "neo-" and just call them, "Assyria," and, "Babylonia," or, "Babylon." It is helpful, as you're trying to keep this in your mind, to associate the Assyrians with the fall of the Northern Kingdom Israel, Babylon with the fall of the Southern Kingdom Judah, and Persia with the return of Israelites from exile. Almost all of the prophetic books of the Old Testament can be placed in one those three contexts: either the context of the Assyrian threat, or the context of the Babylonian threat, or the return under Persia. The books of Joel and Obadiah being the only two exceptions, because it is not possible to determine a date for these two authors from their books. Everybody else is either Assyrian threat, Babylonian threat, or return under Persia.

Isaiah's prophecy is quite unique in the scope of history covered in that it touches on all three contexts. Not only does Isaiah deal extensively with the Assyrian threat of his day; he also sees ahead to the resurgence of Babylonia, and then even further ahead to the rise of Persia under Cyrus.

In Isaiah 1-39, what we have been calling, "The Book of the King," we dealt mostly with Assyria. Tiglath-Pileser III, who Ahaz unwisely courted back in Isaiah 7, elevated the Assyrian kingdom once again to empire status. Assyria was still going strong under Sennacherib, who Hezekiah resisted in Isaiah 36. Sennacherib's death is recorded in Isaiah 37, along with 120,000 soldiers who died by plague. Empires were often destabilized with the death of a strong ruler like Sennacherib. We should think, even more destabilized with the deaths of 120,000 soldiers. Assyria's vassals were certainly thinking at that time that, you know, maybe now is it, maybe this is when we can grab a piece of the larger pie.

But that didn't happen right away. The decline of Assyria was not a guarantee in Isaiah's time. Sennacherib's heir, Esarhaddon, also mentioned in Isaiah 37, successfully consolidated power and eventually led an invasion into Egypt, expanding Assyria's geographic dominance to its greatest extent ever. You know, people weren't thinking Assyria's over. The Empire might have been in decline, but that would not have been clear to any of the people living under Esarhaddon's reign when Isaiah completed the writing of this book. People weren't thinking Assyria was about to fall.

It might be possible for Isaiah to guess at a Babylonian resurgence. There is usually someone guessing future events correctly because there so many people are putting forth their option. If you get 20 political pundits guessing on the outcome of a war, somebody is going to get it right. There is always someone who is going to pick the right team to win at Superbowl. The Dallas Cowboys' fans are always going to be rooting for Dallas, and Philadelphia Eagles' fans are always going to be rooting for Philadelphia. Somebody is going to be right at some point. Maybe there was some Babylonian fan writing about re-establishing the Babylonian Empire, so somebody thought that Babylon could rise again. Just like there is always some Croatian betting on Croatia to win the world cup. It has not happened yet, but if it every does, that guy will be right.

Betting on Babylon, Isaiah was certainly in the minority. Sure, Babylon had once reigned over all Mesopotamia. But placing a bet on Babylon taking down Assyria might be like placing a bet on the United Kingdom to take out the United States. The United Kingdom, sure, they once ruled a worldwide empire. They were it. But can you imagine now the United Kingdom crushing the United States in a decisive military campaign? Can that happen any time in this generation? Is it even thinkable?

Maybe it is not so hard to imagine Babylon is rising up again as it is to imagine Assyria being demolished. At this point in history, Assyria is the Iron Empire. They have all the technology, all the chariots. They are putting trained armies into the field. These are professional soldiers and they can put in more than one army of 50 thousand men at a time. Their Empire is vast. Their resources are enormous. Their cities are impregnable. Their technology is the most advanced.

Dan Carlin suggests this comparison in his Hardcore History podcast on Persia called, "The King of Kings," (which, by the way, I highly recommend), he asks something like this, I changed it a little bit but, what would the world look like if you woke up tomorrow and the news headlines read, "The United States of America is no more. Washington D. C. has fallen. The White House is burnt to the ground. The Supreme Court is gone. The Capital building is gone. The Washington memorial has been carried off to London. Abraham Lincoln's statue carried off as well. New York has fallen. Los Angeles has fallen. Chicago has fallen. The United States is done." No recovery. It can never raise up again.

Who would predict that? And how can you imagine that? And what would the world be after that? The scramble for power to fill the void of a United States that was here yesterday and is gone tomorrow. In 612 BC, news began to spread from Mesopotamia outward, "Nineveh had fallen." It was looted and burned. Assyria was no more. Babylonians, allied with Medes from the Asian steppes, had brought down Goliath. They defeated the Assyrians. The unthinkable had happened. The undefeatable had been defeated. What is going to happen next? With the Assyrians gone, who fills the power vacuum? Who will gain and then, who will lose?

Four major players jostled for control of the former Assyrian territory. The Lydians controlled most of Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. The Medes controlled north of Mesopotamia from the border of Turkey, practically all the way to India. And that includes the Persian homeland, but nobody is thinking about them yet. And after 1000 years, the Babylonians were once again masters of Mesopotamia. Down south, no surprise, Egypt is in control.

During this jostling for power, all the smaller regional powers had decisions to make. How much land should they try to grab for their own, and with whom should they ally? Can they get together enough of the little guys so they can stand up to the one of the big guys, or should they cast in their lot with one of the big guys? This has been a regular theme in the book of Isaiah. Back in chapter 7 Ahaz, struggling with this kind of decision when faced by the regional powers of Israel and Syria, made alliance with Assyria. That turned out poorly. They invited a lion to their back yard to deal with a snake. Later, the whole backdrop of chapters 28-39 is about Hezekiah's decision to trust Egypt for help against Assyria, contrary to Isaiah's advice. Hezekiah later repents and God saves Israel from Sennacherib. The future rulers of Judah are going to have the same kind of decision to deal with. Do they ally with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, or do they turn south for help from Egypt, or do they remain neutral, trusting in Yahweh alone?

God gives Isaiah eyes to see what will be. Judah's leaders will regularly break treaty with Babylon, just as they did with Assyria. But they will not trust Yahweh. They do not break treaty because of this faith in this walk with God. Babylon will eventually become fed up with Judah and God will allow Babylon to conquer and to send Jews into exile. Isaiah is saying this is what is going to happen. That prophecy in itself is astounding. Remember, in Isaiah's day, Assyria looks unbeatable. Still, at least Babylon was a possible player.

But to predict the rise of Persia and to name some unknown Cyrus is beyond belief. The most astute political pundit, or most in-touch spiritual advisor, or most observant genius mentalist would never come up with such a precise and unthinkable prophecy as the overthrow of Babylon by a Persian named, Cyrus. The only way to believe this is to believe that there is a God who knows what will be and is able to ensure, through His sovereign wisdom and power, that what He sees will, indeed, become just as He has seen it. And that's why no secular scholar is willing to date this section of Isaiah during the lifetime of Isaiah. This cannot be unless you factor in God.

I did not name Persia among the four major powers competing for the former Assyrian territories: Lydia, Media, Babylonia, and Egypt. That will change rather quickly and dramatically. The dominance of Babylon in Mesopotamia will be short lived, only 73 years from the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC, to the fall of Babylon in 539 BC.

Cyrus became king in 559 BC, 53 years after the demise of the Assyrian Empire. Twenty years later, he had defeated and subjugated all the northern rivals for empire. He began with the Medes.

From what I have read, the Medes and Persians are like cousins. The relationship is close. They were semi-nomadic tribes, meaning that culturally the Median and Persian tribal groups moved around on the Asian steppes north of the Zagros mountains, they were very good with horses so they looked like nomadic people, but they also had established cities. So they're not a fully nomadic people. Herodotus wrote that every Persian boy was taught three things: how to ride a horse, how to shoot a bow, and always to tell the truth. The Median king Astyages was the suzerain over his Persian vassals. The first major move Cyrus made after he became leader over the Persians, which we don't really know much about that story, the first major move he made was to revolt against Astyages, successfully bringing the Median and Persian tribes together under his leadership with Persia on top. So it's flipped. You often see in the Bible the Medes and the Persians. Well, after Cyrus it should be, "the Persians and the Medes," because people are used to the Medes being in charge, but not anymore.

Cyrus turned next to Asia Minor, where he defeated the Lydians. That expanded his Empire all the way to Greece, or the border with Greece, which is going to cause Persia all kinds of headaches in the future. Coming into contact with the Greeks, sets up some history you may know about: the Persia-Greek wars in the reigns of Darius and Xerxes. Some of the famous battles that still live in the Western consciousness are the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae, the naval battle at Salamis, and the runner who announced the Greek victory from Marathon. Those names ring a bell. But that is all for a later time after Cyrus.

After he conquers the Lydians, Cyrus spends a decade consolidating his rule. Then he turns to Babylon. Both Biblical and non-Biblical texts contribute to our knowledge of Babylon's fall. The year is 539.

The Biblical depiction is in Daniel 5. Belshazzar holds a great feast while the Persian army sits outside the gates of Babylon. Belshazzar has brought out for use the gold vessels taken from God's Temple in Jerusalem. He then famously sees the writing on the wall as God causes a hand to write out these damning words, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin." The prophet Daniel is brought in to provide an interpretation. This is what he told Belshazzar.

MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5:26-28)

Belshazzar dies that night. Darius the Mede, a commander in the Persian army, entered the city and took control. That's the Biblical record of events.

We get additional information from the Persian record. The Cyrus cylinder, a small cylinder discovered in the ruins of Babylon and dated to this period, credits the fall of Babylon to Nabonidus' failure as king to honor the god Marduk.

Nabonidus was Belshazzar's father. Looks like they were co-ruling, or maybe Belshazzar had authority in Babylon. Nabonidus was known for his love of antiquities and for his promotion of the moon god Sin over Babylon's patron god Marduk. Nabonidus spent most of his time away from Babylon. Doing so, he created a lot of ill will with the powerful priestly faction by missing, in a row, ten New Year's celebrations in the city at which as king he was supposed to take the hand of Marduk and receive the god's blessing on Babylon. Nabonidus' failure to stand before the statue of Marduk and honor him created resentment in Babylon, especially in light of other economic and political problems, and those, then, were attributed to Marduk's displeasure, and Nabonidus was the cause.

As the Persian army approached Babylon, Nabonidus also collected various idol gods from Mesopotamia vassal peoples and had those gods brought into Babylon. The reason is not explained in the text, but a positive reason for rounding up the gods of the peoples was to protect them from the Persian invasion. So the invaders get as far as the wall of Babylon, then they're stopped, and they're not able to get any of the gods and take back as trophies. A more negative view suggests that Nabonidus collected the people's gods in ransom to assure their continued allegiance. You know, we've got your gods in Babylon. If you don't want them to fall to the Persians, you better fight with us.

Scholars think Cyrus used this growing ill will against Nabonidus to turn his subjects against him. So even while there's fighting outside Babylon, there is a lot of propaganda going on. Somehow the word was getting into Babylon, "Do not resist us and there will be no punishment! We are going to take out the leaders, but we will return you and your gods to your homeland. Just welcome us in." The Cyrus cylinder argues that Marduk rejected Nabonidus and choose Cyrus instead to rule over Babylon. And the stories we get, but the Biblical story and the Persian story is that Persia went in and took Babylon without destroying the city.

After that, Cyrus does allow peoples to return to their cities, along with their gods, the ones that had been held in ransom, and ones who had been gathered before, and that's going to include the Jews and the artifacts from the Temple; those very artifacts that Belshazzar was dishonoring in the feast. Those artifacts from the Temple of Yahweh are now going to be returned.

The Biblical record attests to Cyrus' policy of tolerance towards Judah in the last paragraph of the book of Chronicles and the first paragraph of the book of Ezra. I'm going to read from Ezra 1:1-3. The reference to the first year is the first year of Cyrus' reign over Babylon, or the first year of his reign over the Israelites. He has already ruled the Persians for 20 years. Ezra 1:1-3,

¹ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying: ² "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.'"

The reference to the word of Jeremiah being fulfilled is the word that Israel would be captive for 70 years in Babylon before the return. Both the exile and the return took a number of years. So, when to start and end the captivity is not clear. I like to think of it in God-centered terms, starting with the destruction of His Temple in 586 BC, lasting until the completion of the new Temple in 515 BC, a span of 70 years. Cyrus' proclamation of return allows for both the return of the people and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, which includes the rebuilding of the Temple. And that satisfies the prophecies both of Jeremiah and of Isaiah. There is a lot more to read about the return in the book of Ezra, but I will leave that there. So what we have covered: this is the historical context of the Cyrus prophecy here in Isaiah, from the fall of Assyria to Cyrus' decree that the Jews may return and rebuild.

Now let's look back over our 13 verses and consider the meaning of the prophecy with this historical context in mind. We will, again, divide the prophecy into two parts, with God first addressing Judah, and then addressing Cyrus. We start by reading again the address to Judah in Isaiah 44:24-28.

The Meaning of the Text

The Word to Judah (44:24-28)

²⁴ Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb,
"I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself
And spreading out the earth all alone,

²⁵ Causing the omens of boasters to fail, Making fools out of diviners,
Causing wise men to draw back And turning their knowledge into foolishness,

execute this plan after they got permission from the Persian leaders. So there are people involved. From the human perspective we see that. But God is the One who empowers men to will and to do. This is God’s plan announced 150 years in advance, so that as it begins to happen, we will not confuse the work of the human agents with the work of the primary agent who is God. We don’t want another tower of Babel in Jerusalem. You know, Nehemiah holding up the brick and saying, “Look what I have built! Nothing can stand! Look how great we are! We have come back! We have done it again!” So, God is giving this prophecy so far ahead so that there will not be a doubt who made this happen. He formed Israel from the womb. He will later form Cyrus from the womb. God will raise Cyrus to power to be a shepherd for His people.

Now, God speaks directly to Cyrus, Isaiah 45:1-8.

The Word to Cyrus (45:1-8)

<p>¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, To subdue nations before him To open doors before him</p> <p>² “I will go before you I will shatter the doors of bronze</p> <p>³ “I will give you the treasures of darkness So that you may know that it is I,</p> <p>⁴ “For the sake of Jacob My servant, I have also called you by your name;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⁵ “I am the LORD, and there is no other; I will gird you,</p> <p>⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, I am the LORD who does all these.</p> <p>⁸ “Drip down, O heavens, from above, Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">I, the LORD, have created it.</p>	<p>Whom I have taken by the right hand, And to loose the loins of kings; so that gates will not be shut: and make the rough places smooth; and cut through their iron bars. And hidden wealth of secret places, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. And Israel My chosen one, I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me. Besides Me there is no God. though you have not known Me; That there is no one besides Me.</p> <p>Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these. And let the clouds pour down righteousness; And righteousness spring up with it.</p>
---	---

At the end of the word to Judah, God calls Cyrus, “His shepherd.” At the beginning here of his word to Cyrus, He calls Him, “His anointed.” Those are lofty titles. The Hebrew for “anointed” is, “messiah.” All the kings of Israel were anointed by God. They were all “messiah” in a more general sense. They were chosen ones – chosen to lead, to shepherd. There is one true Messiah. Cyrus is not that Messiah. He is not the Servant of the Servant songs in Isaiah.

So, why use the language of shepherd and messiah for Cyrus? Because in his role as a servant for God to bring about the national redemption of Israel, Cyrus foreshadows the true Servant, the true Shepherd, the true Messiah who will accomplish the greater deliverance of spiritual redemption for God’s people, and will establish a truly righteous and truly eternal kingdom on Earth. Cyrus is not that Servant. He foreshadows that Servant.

The role Cyrus is to play has already been suggested back in 41:2 and 25 in our previous lessons.

<p>² “Who has aroused one from the east He delivers up nations before him He makes them like dust with his sword,</p> <p>²⁵ I have aroused one from the north, and he has come; And he will come upon rulers as <i>upon</i> mortar,</p>	<p>Whom He calls in righteousness to His feet? And subdues kings. As the wind-driven chaff with his bow. From the rising of the sun he will call on My name; Even as the potter treads clay.</p>
---	--

Cyrus is both “one from the east” and “one from the north.” The ancient Persian homeland was on the northern border of the Persian gulf, almost due east from Jerusalem. And the Persian Empire’s center of power in Mesopotamia was northeast of Jerusalem. So Cyrus can be said as one from the north or as one from the east. The language of conquering king in 45:2 and 25 fits the task ascribed to Cyrus here in 45:1-2. And this is what he has to do.

¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, To subdue nations before him To open doors before him	Whom I have taken by the right hand, And to loose the loins of kings; so that gates will not be shut:
² “I will go before you I will shatter the doors of bronze	and make the rough places smooth; and cut through their iron bars.

Cyrus certainly subdued nations. First, he defeated the Medes. Then the Lydians. Then the Babylonians. “To loosen the loins of kings” is particularly picturesque. That means you crap all over yourself out of fear at the thought of the coming of the Persian army, of Cyrus. He took out all the major players in the north, so certainly he loosened the loins of the smaller, regional players. God opened doors for Cyrus. Cyrus went through. God made rough places smooth, He cut down the bars of iron. Cyrus went through everything. Success after success after success.

This is the Lord’s plan for the rescue of Israel. And He is doing more. We see that He is doing more than just planning the rescue of Israel. He has reasons for announcing this plan so far in the future. Why give us this prophecy if things are going to happen 150 years later? Three reasons come out in verses 3-7. First, verse 3,

³ “I will give you the treasures of darkness So that you may know that it is I,	And hidden wealth of secret places, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
---	--

That’s the first reason. That is God speaking directly to Cyrus. So that you (Cyrus) may know that it is I the Lord, the God of Israel who calls you by name. So that Cyrus will have knowledge. The text continues.

⁴ “For the sake of Jacob My servant, I have also called you by your name;	And Israel My chosen one, I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me.
---	---

So God honors Cyrus not just for Cyrus, but for the sake of Jacob, His servant, and Israel, His chosen one. It’s for the sake of their rescue, their redemption. But the reason this was being told ahead in the future, and this is a regular theme of Isaiah, is that Israel will know their God; that they’ll read these prophecies, they’re the ones most likely to have them, they are the ones who should have access, who should know the Isaiah prophecies, and it should cause them, when Cyrus raises up, it should cause them to worship their God, to know their God. There is a third reason. Verses 5-7,

⁵ “I am the LORD, and there is no other; I will gird you,	Besides Me there is no God. though you have not known Me;
⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun	That there is no one besides Me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other,	
⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, I am the LORD who does all these.	Causing well-being and creating calamity;

Did you catch the third reason? The first was that Cyrus may know. The second is that Israel may know. The third here is that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun. The sun rises in the east and it sets in the west. God gave this prophecy so that the whole world would know that there is no God other than the God of Israel. That God is truly God. And if Cyrus had embraced Yahweh as the one and only God, then he may have become an instrument to spread of the knowledge of God beyond India to his east and all the way to China, beyond Greece to his west all

the way to Rome. Cyrus doesn't do that. He has this vast empire. And he does proclaim Yahweh as God in Israel. If you notice the language used before in Ezra, it sounds like Cyrus is a worshipper of Yahweh, and he is. He is a worshipper of Yahweh, but he is a worshipper of lots of gods. But the idea that "I am the Lord and there is no other," that God is exclusively God, there is no evidence that Cyrus actually yielded himself to that reality. It is going to be up to the ideal Servant to provide a sign of God's glory, that will be pronounced as far as the east is from the west. This servant, Cyrus, who is a foreshadowing of ideal, plays a role in that. But it doesn't come to full fruition under him. It's going to have to wait until the true Messiah, the true Servant comes. And we will see that sign that goes out to the remotest places of the Earth in the last paragraph of the book of Isaiah.

These three reasons for the prophecy still stand, as a witness of God's nature to Cyrus; as a witness to Israel; and as a witness to the world. God says, "I called you by name... I gave you a title of honor... Though you have not known me." And this is another part of the nature of the witness. God specifically named 150 years in advance the one who would fulfill the role. By giving him this role, God conferred a title of honor on him. He is called, "God's shepherd." He is called, "an anointed one." In spite of that fact, he did not know the name "Yahweh." Cyrus did not know about Yahweh. Maybe after he conquered Babylon he came to know, but before that he didn't know. Cyrus didn't know Yahweh, but Yahweh knew Cyrus. That's the reality for all of us. God sees us in our mother's womb. Before that, we're in His mind. He knows us, though we don't know him. Everybody is given a role to play. Everybody is given this opportunity to bring to fruition God's plan in their life, if we will submit to that knowledge. God knows us. He calls us. He chooses us. We respond. Cyrus will come to know Yahweh, just not as fully as we would hope he would come to know Yahweh.

The nature of the witness, that it was delivered 150 years in advance about some obscure person in some obscure nation, the nature of the witness gives proof to the content. The content of the witness is this: the revelation of the nature of God.

I am the LORD, and there is no other,
⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.

I imagine Daniel the prophet, counselor of kings, being so excited about the moment he could bring this text of Isaiah to Cyrus and show him his own name in the Word of God. And Cyrus, as I've said, he does give honor to Yahweh. But I have not seen evidence that he took these words to heart, that "I am the Lord and there is no other. I Yahweh alone am God."

It may be true that Cyrus worshipped the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. That is the Persian tradition. I've had trouble finding texts that show Cyrus as serious about Ahura Mazda being the one true god. That's Zoroastrianism, which is really unique for its monotheism. Ahura Mazda is considered the one true god engaged as truth and light against the powerful forces of lies and darkness. Zoroastrianism is almost dualistic, that there's a god of good, and light, and truth; and a god of wickedness, and darkness, and lies, but the Zoroastrians believed that Ahura Mazda must eventually triumph. So it's not truly dualistic. Ahura Mazda will be the one standing in the end. The texts we receive about Cyrus show that he was not exclusively monotheistic. And we might make that mistake when we are reading from a Christian worldview Cyrus' decree in Ezra 1:2 "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build him a house in Jerusalem." When we read that, it sounds like someone showed Cyrus Isaiah's prophecy, and it sounds like he believes in God.

And I, again, I imagine that he did believe in Yahweh. But I imagine he believed in Yahweh similarly to how he believed in Ahura Mazda of Persia, and how he believed in Marduk of Babylon, and he believed in countless other gods that he helped return home. I don't think this was just a political strategy to return everybody's god home as part of solidifying his empire. I think Cyrus also wanted the good will of the gods. He believed in all the gods and he wanted the peoples praying to their gods on their behalf. He wanted the good will of the gods. Here is the example from the Persian perspective. Again, the Cyrus cylinder gives this report. And what I am about to read, Cyrus is the one speaking.

When I entered Babylon as a friend and (when) I established the seat of the government in the palace of the ruler under jubilation and rejoicing, Marduk, the great lord, [induced] the magnanimous inhabitants of Babylon [to love me], and I was daily endeavoring to worship him.

May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me (to him); to Marduk, my lord...⁵⁵

We cannot know whether Cyrus eventually took to heart God's words to him in Isaiah. We don't know what happened later in the life of Cyrus. "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God." He has definitely come close to truth, and I hope before his death that he yielded all the way to Yahweh as the one and only true God.

In verse 7, God declares Himself to be the one who forms light and creates darkness. That is an interestingly appropriate choice of words in speaking to a Zoroastrian Persian, who thinks of Ahura Mazda as light and the enemy as darkness. But it is not a choice of words that has to be dependent on Zoroastrianism. Darkness and light are themes in the Old Testament from the first verses of Genesis. To form light is a creative action. It is also interesting in the text here that God says He creates darkness. It doesn't seem like you need to do anything to create darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. In the beginning "the earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep (Genesis 1:2)." Then God said, "let there be light," and there was light. So it doesn't sound like to me you needed to create darkness. Darkness just is the absence of light. But you need to create light to dispel the darkness. We could say that God created darkness in that He created physical space separate from Himself, and that creates the context for the conception of darkness. But I am pretty sure I am overthinking the verset and this idea about creating darkness. Light and dark here are probably meant as metaphors for blessing and curse, and that is indicated by the parallel verset. And this is leading us to our conclusion of verses 7-8,

I am the LORD, and there is no other,
7 The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.

Light and dark are parallel to well-being and calamity. God causes both. God sent Judah into exile. He was the ultimate cause of that calamity. Not Nebuchadnezzar. God rescued the Jews from exile. He was the ultimate cause of that well-being. Not Cyrus.

God is just and good in all that He allows, whether it's well-being or calamity, even when that calamity is brought about by evil men, or when the well-being is accomplished by one who does not know God. God's plan in dealing with wicked human beings involves both tragedy and blessing. There is pain and bounty. There is sin and there is evil, but that is brought in by human beings. God's actions throughout are righteous. And the results are ultimately good and true, verse 8, our last verse,

8 "Drip down, O heavens, from above, And let the clouds pour down righteousness;
Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit, And righteousness spring up with it.
I, the LORD, have created it.

God sees everything so far ahead. And God ultimately works all things together for the blessing of those who love Him. God's righteous plan for His people requires the Jewish return to Israel. If He has declared redemption for Israel, which He has, then He is bound by His own nature to accomplish His own word. God's faithfulness to His word goes all the way back to His promise to Abraham that through Abraham's seed all the nations of the Earth would be blessed. And at this point in Isaiah's day, God's faithfulness is also stretching ahead to Jesus, the true seed of Abraham through whom the blessing of the nations would come. The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple are both necessary events to prepare for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant through the coming of the true Messiah.

⁵⁵ J. B. Pritchard (Ed.). *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, 3rd ed. with Supplement.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 316.

With this in mind, I don't think it is too hard to argue that Cyrus of Persia is one of the most important, influential men of all time. Yes, he was incredibly successful as the king who picked up the pieces of the Assyrian Empire, establishing a new empire that would be influential for thousands of years, continuing even into our day through the modern state of Iran. And for all that Cyrus is one of the great men of history, on par with an Alexander, Genghis Khan, Napoleon.

But even as astounding as the founding of the Persian Empire was, it was not nearly the most influential accomplishment of Cyrus. He freed the Jews and enabled their return. How radically different would our world look if the Jews had never come back from exile? If The temple had never been rebuilt? If Jesus Christ had never been born? No Judaism. No Christianity. No Islam.

Cyrus was a watershed man. The flow of history could have taken an extremely different turn apart from him, or depending on how he lived out his life. Cyrus is certainly one of the most influential men who has ever lived - from the human perspective of history. And even in proclaiming this ahead of time, Isaiah reminds us that God is the primary agent through history. God is the one who will rise up Cyrus. God is the one who will initiate the decision in Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem. God is the one who does this. God is the one in whom we trust and that's why we have been given this prophecy so far in advance, so that we could realize, so we can put our trust in the God who sees. Nothing you are going through, nothing that is happening is not part of God's plan, and no one can overcome the plan of God. The Christian does not despair because we know we win. Hope never dies. Jesus is the rock and the increase of His government is a guarantee. He will reign. He does reign. God assures us,

²⁸ "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.'
And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.' "

I am the LORD, and there is no other,

⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.

Lesson 27 Isaiah 45:9-25 God’s Plan for Obstinate Israel 1

Introduction

Isaiah		
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."		
Book of the Servant 40-55		
The Great Deliverance 44:24-48:22		
Cyrus 44:24-45:8	Israel 45:9-46:13	Babylon 47:1-48:22
A The rebuilders of Zion (44:24-28) B The irresistible conqueror (45:1-8)	A The Lord asserts his sovereignty over Israel (45:9-13) B Israel still at the center of the Lord's world-wide plans (45:14-25) C The Lord asserts his care over Israel (46:1-13)	A Babylon conquered (47:1-15) B The captives liberated (48:1-22)

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Let’s start with a recap of where we are in our structure of Isaiah. We’ve divided Isaiah into three books, The Book of the King; the book of the Servant; and the Book of the Conqueror. That three-part division of Isaiah is pretty standard. The titles come from Alec Motyer. And I continue to use his titles as we further break down the structure.

Right now, we are in the Book of the Servant, which can be divided into four major sections, The Consolation of the World; The Redemption of Israel; The Great Deliverance; and the Greater Deliverance. The theme of the Great Deliverance, our current section, has been raised both in our previous sections of consolation and redemption. God’s people need consolation because Israel will be exiled. That will not be the end. Israel will consequently be redeemed. That redemption will come in two forms, national redemption from exile and spiritual redemption from sin. Those are the themes of the last two sections of the Book of the Servant. The Great Deliverance further develops the promise of national redemption, and the Greater Deliverance further develops the promise of spiritual redemption.

We began the third section of the Book of the Servant, the Great Deliverance, in our last lesson with the Cyrus prophecy. My focus on historical background made for a long lesson, so I have not yet discussed the structure of the Great Deliverance. Motyer gave me options, and I chose the simplest one. We will divide the Great Deliverance into three parts titled, Cyrus; Israel; and Babylon.

The Cyrus section announces God’s plan to use a non-Jewish messiah (anointed one) to liberate Israel from Babylon. The Israel section considers Israel’s response to that unexpected plan, and the Babylon section describes how the plan will unfold.

Having covered the Cyrus section in our last lesson, we’re ready now to consider Israel’s response to God’s plan. I had thought to do this in one lesson, but there is so much interesting connection between this chapter and Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, I’m going to need two lessons to cover this. There are prophecies about Israel here that look so far ahead into the future, it will be really helpful to have Paul come in with added information about these prophecies. He has advantage over Isaiah in that he receives revelation about Israel’s role in the plan after the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been made known.

We will address this Israel section as a loose chiasm. Israel complains about God’s plan to use Cyrus. God rebukes Israel and explains He still intends for Israel to play a central role in the plan, and then Israel complains again. Complaint, correction, complaint, that’s our loose chiasm.

We will cover the first complaint and the correction in this lesson. That’s in 45:9-25. We will leave the second complaint in chapter 46 for our next lesson. The text of this first complaint is really a response from God to Israel. The complaint is understood in the way that God responds. Motyer titles the section, “Impermissible Questions: The Sovereign Lord.” This is 45:9-13.

Impermissible Questions: The Sovereign Lord 45:9-13

- ⁹ “Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker—
Will the clay say to the potter,
Or the thing you are making say,
¹⁰ “Woe to him who says to a father,
‘What are you begetting?’
¹¹ Thus says the LORD,
“Ask Me about the things to come concerning
My sons,
¹² “It is I who made the earth,
I stretched out the heavens with My hands
¹³ “I have aroused him in righteousness
He will build My city
Without any payment or reward,”
- An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth!
‘What are you doing?’
‘He has no hands’?
Or to a woman,
‘To what are you giving birth?’ ”
the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker:
And you shall commit to Me the work of My hands.
and created man upon it.
And I ordained all their host.
And I will make all his ways smooth;
and will let My exiles go free,
says the LORD of hosts.

Sovereignty versus obstinance

God has a plan. This passage starts with the implication that someone is quarreling with God about that plan. The previous passage, the Cyrus prophecy, ended with this assertion from God.

- I am the LORD, and there is no other,
⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity;
I am the LORD who does all these.

God has a plan. That plan includes both calamity and well-being for Israel; calamity in defeat, destruction, and deportation to Babylon; well-being in deliverance from Babylon through Cyrus. From God’s perspective, the whole plan is good news. The very last verse of the Cyrus prophecy is both a conclusion and a bridge to our present section about Israel. 45:8.

- ⁸ “Drip down, O heavens, from above, And let the clouds pour down righteousness;
Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit, And righteousness spring up with it.
I, the LORD, have created it.

We are certainly supposed to see the plan of God as good news. This is righteousness. But Israel does not. There are two major problems with the plan from the Jewish perspective. First, Israel is going to be defeated and deported. That’s a problem. Second, the shepherd that God has anointed, the messiah who will deliver Israel, is not even Jewish. He is some foreign king from the northeast whose name is Cyrus. Faithful Jews might hear this plan as a rejection of the Davidic Messiah, a moving on from David to a Persian.

We are supposed to assume out the outset of this passage that the Jews have objected to the plan in way similar to the later prophet Habakkuk. This is what Habakkuk was known for. He will be active during the time of the Babylonian threat. He will prophesy about the same eventual exile that Isaiah is here prophesying about, just that he’ll be much closer to the event. Habakkuk asks God to do something about the wickedness of Judean Jews. He sees a problem in Judea. God has a plan. Babylon will be sent to judge Judah. Habakkuk is shocked when God reveals that plan. He quarrels with God.

- Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You cannot look on wickedness *with favor*.
Why do You look with favor
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?

Habakkuk 1:13

Habakkuk was ready for Judah to be judged. As a faithful believer he knew Judah deserved punishment. But to use Gentiles to punish the chosen people? That just couldn’t be it! That can’t be the plan! This dismay that we hear from Habakkuk is what we should imagine when we turn back to Isaiah’s passage. Not only has Isaiah revealed the plan of a Babylonian punishment: he has also

foreseen a type of Gentile Messiah. And the Jews are shocked. They don't like the plan. They oppose the plan. Our passage records God's response to their complaint. This is God speaking.

⁹ "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker— An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth!
Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?'
Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands?'"

Woe in this sense is the declaration of punishment or calamity on the one who would have the audacity to quarrel. It's not going to go well to argue with the One who has made you. Nor should it go well. It makes no sense that we should instruct Him: the One who came up with the very idea of our existence, who envisioned us, who designed us, who brought us into being. Isaiah likens it to a clay pot or vessel among all the vessels of the earth.

Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?'

And that is almost a Disney movie. Imagine a clay jar used for storing grain or wine hopping into the potter's workroom to berate him, "What do you think you are doing using me this way?" And imagine a half-made vessel on the potter's wheel joining in to say, "He has no hands," even as those hands are carefully forming that vessel!

This is the Israelite questioning of God's plan, "What are you doing?" And a second Israelite going further to deny that God is even able to accomplish His will, "He has no hands." Isaiah follows with a second metaphor.

¹⁰ "Woe to him who says to a father, Or to a woman,
'What are you begetting?' 'To what are you giving birth?'"

The question seems absurd. A father and a mother give birth to a baby. There is a similar absurdity in questioning God's plan. God is giving birth to a holy people: to a people that can be called by His name. Instead of questioning, judging, rejecting how God goes about doing this, Israel should be seeking to understand God's plan from the attitude of obedience and worship. God is not willing to be questioned by His people about His sovereign right and His ability to execute His plan. He is willing to explain His plan to a people that will trust Him and want to understand Him and are seeking Him. Verse 11.

¹¹ Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker:
"Ask Me about the things to come concerning And you shall commit to Me the work of My hands.
My sons,

"Ask me" God says. He is willing to reveal what He plans to do. And "commit to me the work of my hands." This is the right response. Trust God's plan to God because He is God. Verses 12-13.

¹² "It is I who made the earth, and created man upon it.
I stretched out the heavens with My hands And I ordained all their host.
¹³ "I have aroused him in righteousness And I will make all his ways smooth;
He will build My city and will let My exiles go free,
Without any payment or reward," says the LORD of hosts.

Cyrus is the plan. God is Sovereign. God is able. God made the heavens and earth. When He says He plans to raise up Cyrus to build Jerusalem and let the exiles go free, you can bet on that plan. Cyrus is going to do it without payment or reward. God has got it all figured out. This is the way it is going to be.

Accepting God's plan for humanity is an ongoing struggle for humans, not only among non-believers, but also among those we who have believed. Test yourself. Read through the Bible, and I'm sure you will find God doing all kinds of things that you object to, that you emotionally, intellectually, you just struggle to agree with. There is a lot. The punishment of Adam and Eve that brings sin and death to all people; allowing pain and suffering to affect good people; allowing Satan to continue to influence the world; the Flood; the conquest of Canaan; striking dead that priest who touched the Ark of the Covenant; striking dead Ananias and Saphira after Jesus had come; not removing our body of sin when we believed; requiring knowledge of Jesus Christ as the exclusive means of salvation;

condemning non-believers to Hell. There is a lot about God's plan revealed in the Bible that causes severe angst and dismay. Is this plan really good? How can this be the plan? Is this the way God is going to bring about His Kingdom?

Complaint in the Letter to the Romans

I intentionally brought up Habakkuk as an example. One, because he's a good example of this kind of questioning attitude, but also because he is a stepping stone that helps clarify the link between Isaiah and the Apostle Paul, particularly in regard to a rejection of God's revealed plan. The revealed good news of God is resisted here in Isaiah 45. The revealed will of God is resisted in the prophecy of Habakkuk, and the revealed will of God is going to be resisted throughout the argument section of Romans, chapters 1-11.

The connection between Paul and Habakkuk is set up in the thesis statement in Romans 1:17 where Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, "But the righteous man shall live by faith (Romans 1:17)." That quote does two things. It brings in for Paul the issue of righteousness by faith. (And righteousness is going to be a big issue for us here in Isaiah 45.) It also sets up for Paul a particular literary approach in the letter to the Romans. Habakkuk was the prophet who stood on the wall in defiance of God's plan. He could not accept the judgment of wicked Judah by the more wicked Babylonians. God told Habakkuk to wait for it. It was going to happen. God is sovereign. Habakkuk had a choice. He could either respond as a righteous man in faith, or he could set himself against God as a proud man in opposition. Habakkuk started with resistance, struggling to accept this unthinkable plan of God. But his perspective dramatically changes, so that by the end of the book he is seeing God's plan with the eyes of faith. His prophecy ends with these words, Habakkuk 3:17-19.

17	Though the fig tree should not blossom	And there be no fruit on the vines,
	Though the yield of the olive should fail	And the fields produce no food,
	Though the flock should be cut off from the fold	And there be no cattle in the stalls,
18	Yet I will exult in the LORD,	I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
19	The Lord GOD is my strength,	And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,
	And makes me walk on my high places.	

In Romans 1-11 Paul argues for the righteous plan of God that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. As with Habakkuk, every person has a choice to make. The righteous will live by faith, accepting and submitting to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while the proud will resist the plan as being incompatible with their vision, their understanding of who God is and what His plan ought to be.

Paul uses the literary device of a Jewish opponent who rejects God's plan, just as we see here in Habakkuk, and as we see here in Isaiah. When Paul explains the Good News of justification by faith in chapters 1-4, the Jewish opponent pushes back, "That invalidates the Law!" When Paul explains the Good News of empowerment through grace in chapters 5-8, the Jewish opponent pushes back, "That promotes sin!" When Paul explains the Good News of inclusion in mercy in chapters 9-11, the Jewish opponent pushes back, "That invalidates God's promises to Israel!"

Opposition by Jews against the Gospel plan climaxes in that last section, Romans 9-11. There is a double problem. Not only will the majority of Jews reject Jesus as the Messiah (as Cyrus is rejected here) and then be left out of the New Covenant community, but the majority who will be included by faith into the New Covenant community are going to be Gentiles. That's shocking news to the Jews. Certainly, disobedient Jews should be left out. But to include a majority of Gentiles who are not even required to keep Old Testament law, that is scandalous. That plan cannot be, it ought not be.

Paul insists that is exactly the way it is going to be. God has acted in His sovereignty through Jesus Christ. This is the plan. Paul picks up on the same metaphor we see in Isaiah 45:9 of a potter's sovereignty over the vessels he has made. Romans 9:18-21.

So then [God] has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make

me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

Just as Jewish listeners would object to God's plan of exile to Babylon and redemption through Cyrus, so also Paul's Jewish listeners would object to God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus that would leave unbelieving Jews out and include believing Gentiles in.

But if that's the plan, what does that mean for Israel? To use Paul's language in Romans 11:1 and 11, "I say then, God has not rejected his people, has he? ... They have not stumbled so as to fall, did they? May it never be!" Do the use of Babylon to punish Israel and the use of Cyrus to provide national redemption indicate a moving on from Israel to Gentiles; a moving away from the promises to David? Has the sin of Judah lead to a complete rejection of Israel? Have they stumbled so badly as to fall out of God's plan of salvation? According to Paul, "may it never be!" Also, according to Isaiah, no they have not. That's the emphasis provided in the middle of our loose chiasm. We move now from complaint to correction. This passage is titled "A World Plan, A Central People," Isaiah 45:14-25.

A World Plan, A Central People 45:14-25

See if you pick up on any allusions that Paul uses later in his letters.

- ¹⁴ Thus says the LORD,
"The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush And the Sabeans, men of stature,
Will come over to you and will be yours; They will walk behind you, they will come over
in chains
And will bow down to you; They will make supplication to you:
'Surely, God is with you, and there is none else, No other God.' "
- ¹⁵ Truly, You are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, Savior!
¹⁶ They will be put to shame and even humiliated, all of them;
The manufacturers of idols will go away together in humiliation.
¹⁷ Israel has been saved by the LORD With an everlasting salvation;
You will not be put to shame or humiliated To all eternity.
¹⁸ For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He is the God
who formed the earth and made it, He established it
and did not create it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited),
"I am the LORD, and there is none else.
¹⁹ "I have not spoken in secret, In some dark land;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek Me in a waste place';
I, the LORD, speak righteousness, Declaring things that are upright.
²⁰ "Gather yourselves and come; Draw near together,
you fugitives of the nations;
They have no knowledge, Who carry about their wooden idol
And pray to a god who cannot save.
²¹ "Declare and set forth your case; Indeed, let them consult together.
Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it?
Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me,
A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except Me.
²² "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth;
For I am God, and there is no other.
²³ "I have sworn by Myself, The word has gone forth from My mouth
in righteousness
And will not turn back,
That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.
²⁴ "They will say of Me, 'Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.'
Men will come to Him, And all who were angry at Him will be put to shame.
²⁵ "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel Will be justified and will glory."

The Importance of Israel

Every knee will bow and every tongue confess. Do you recognize that in Paul's letters? It is in Philippians 2:10-11 in reference to Jesus who become a servant, even to the point of death, but then He was lifted up again by God. Every knee bows and every tongue confessed that He is Lord. Paul quotes the same verse in Romans 14:11 to emphasize that we all stand before God as our Lord. We will come back to Paul at the end of this lesson and the beginning of the next. This passage starts with a surprising prophecy concerning Israel. And we're going to really have to think about this, what could this mean.

¹⁴ Thus says the LORD,

“The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush	And the Sabeans, men of stature,
Will come over to you and will be yours;	They will walk behind you, they will come over in chains
And will bow down to you;	They will make supplication to you:
‘Surely, God is with you,	and there is none else, No other God.’ ”

Isaiah referred to these same three nations of Egypt, Cush, and Seba in 43:3, saying that they would be given in ransom for Israel. The three terms cover the upper and lower Nile region which we can lump together as “greater Egypt.” The southern superpower of greater Egypt is representative of human power and opposition to God in much the same way that the northern superpowers of Babylon and Assyria are representative of that human power and opposition to God. Reference to Egypt links the original Exodus story to the future exodus foray of Babylon. We have already seen that a few times. In this prophecy, the products of greater Egypt are to be given over to Israel as plunder, and the people of Egypt are to walk behind Israel as captives.

When does that come true? There is no direct reference here to Israel. The pronoun “you” is not specified. So, the suggestion has been made that we are not talking about Israel at all, but this is Cyrus. The military language fits the Cyrus prophecy well. But not only did Cyrus not defeat Egypt, more to the point, the pronoun “you” here is feminine singular in the Hebrew. Isaiah is making sure we don't connect this to Cyrus. So this is Israel.

That creates another problem. Persia did eventually conquer Egypt. Israel never did. Israel never took the plunder of Egypt nor led her peoples as captives. Unless maybe we really stretch it and say this is the Six Day War in 1967. But I really don't think that fits. We have options in how we might interpret this prophecy. There are two issues to consider. The first regards how we understand prophecy about Israel in the New Covenant age. We'll need to spend some time on that. The second regards whether the defeat of Egypt here is military or spiritual. So, is military language figurative?

There are two traditional approaches to how we understand the prophecies regarding Israel in the new Covenant Age. One approach takes Israel to be the Israel of old, the geo-political state made up of ethnic Jews. This approach emphasizes discontinuity between the old and the new. Israel is Israel. Israel is not the Church. The Church is the Church. This approach is associated more with dispensationalism. A different traditional approach is to understand the Church and Israel as synonymous in the New Covenant age. Prophecies about the people of God Israel in the Old Covenant now apply to the people of God, the Church, in the New Covenant. This approach emphasizes continuity between the old and the new. Israel flows right into the Church. It's the people of God. This approach is more associated with covenantalism.

The first approach might understand the capture of Egypt literally or figuratively. It could be a military victory or a spiritual victory. When we go back to the original Exodus, we can get a sense of what that might look like after the tenth plague, where God did all the fighting. It was a spiritual battle. The Egyptians gave goods to the Israelites just to get them out of Egypt. And there were a number of Egyptians who joined the Israelites when they left. And the Bible even uses the language of “plunder”. Israelites “plundered” the Egyptians. Whether we consider the language as a military truth, or if we understand it as a spiritual reality that the Egyptians join in spiritually with Israel, the

key point to the first traditional approach is that Israel will fulfill this prophecy as an ethnic, geo-political entity. It is the nation Israel, and that's what we should be looking for.

The second approach might also view the plunder of Egypt as either a military event or a spiritual reality. But either way, the prophecy would be fulfilled by the Church, the new Israel, not ethnic Israel. And I was trying to figure out a way if we think of Israel as the Church, how might this be true as a military event. And I think in the Crusades there were believers who could use this as a prophecy that would validate conquering Egypt as the Kingdom of God on Earth. More likely, the second approach would interpret the plundering of Egypt as a spiritual event, where the peoples of Egypt become part of the Church. The key point to this approach is that we read the prophecies about Israel as prophecies that are realized in the Church: the Church is the new Israel.

There is some justification in the text of Isaiah both for reading this prophecy as figurative of a spiritual conquest of Egypt, and as applying this prophecy to the New Covenant people of God, to the Church. The new Zion image in Isaiah 2:3 with the peoples of the Earth streaming into Jerusalem sounds very much like the New Heaven and New Earth of Revelation. If that's true, the Gentiles are not streaming into an ethnic community of Jews. When they stream into Zion, they are streaming into the multi-ethnic community of the Church. There is also the oracle in Isaiah 19:22-25 that describes the people of God as a multi-ethnic community.

²² The LORD will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to them and will heal them. ²³ In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. ²⁴ In that day Israel will be the third *party* with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, ²⁵ whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."

How are we to understand that prophecy? The New Covenant community of the Church provides a conceptual framework that aligns very well with this prophecy, of Egyptians, and Assyrians, and Jews worshipping God together. Paul says in Ephesians 2 that when Christ broke down the barrier, He became our peace and He took the two men, the Jew and the Gentile, and He brought them together as one in Christ. Still, someone could point out that the way Israel is being used in this passage is not as the multi-ethnic church, it's not Assyria and Egypt will become part of Israel. They don't melt into Israel, but Israel remains ethnic Israel in this prophecy. It's Egypt, and Assyria, and Israel together. Maybe it's more the first approach?

I do not favor either traditional approach. I think the tension between these two ways of understanding Israel raises important questions to think about. But I also think presenting the issue as an either/or creates a polarization that results in proponents of one approach or the other being a little too confident in their interpretations. They might automatically assume that we're speaking of ethnic Israel, or they might automatically assume that it's the New Covenant community the Church, whereas in the original prophecy it's just not clear. We don't want to be overly confident just because we've come up with a mechanism, a way that we always interpret. I believe there is a better, third, approach. Before stating that approach, we first do need to talk about the obscurity usually inherent in prophecies of the far future. Far future prophecy is often very hard to interpret in detail until the prophecy is actually fulfilled. We may get some clear detail, but that is more an exception than the rule. For example, the naming of Cyrus. That is a lot of detail. We are looking for a guy named, Cyrus. That level of specificity is unprecedented. That's much more an exception than the rule. Prophecy of the far future usually outlines principles and events. God reveals the details of that outline but over time, not all at once. We have to get closer to the events and then the details become clearer. Like Habakkuk, the faithful must wait for the plan to unfold.

Prophecy regarding the far distant future is just as fuzzy as looking at a far distant horizon. We might be able to recognize a white church spire, or the blue of the sea, or a towering, purple mountain, but the water particles in the air make the details all the more blurry the further away the objects of our

gaze. In a similar way, the details of prophecy become blurred by the further away in time that the prophetic events will take place.

We can also compare it to a mountain. Sometimes the mountain the prophet sees in the distance looks like one massive peak. As events progress, the people of God climb one peak to realize there is a long valley between that peak and the next peak. You know, what looked like one peak is at least two. For example, prophecies of Israel's return from exile might seem to include the building of the Temple and the establishment of David's eternal throne. In the prophecy it all seems to happen together. But after reaching the peak of a rebuilt Temple, believers faced a valley of 500 years before reaching the point of the Messiah's coming. And it was not until the ascension of the Messiah back into Heaven that believers understood, "Oh, He's coming more than once!" There is a long valley between the Messiah's first coming and His second coming. What appeared to be one large mountainous peak in Isaiah, upon closer inspection, is at least three distinct peaks in time. The building of the Temple, and then there's a long time before Jesus comes the first time, and then there's a long time before Jesus comes again. And the details of that third coming, the third peak, they're not so clearly defined as we would like. So there are still questions in our far future, and the details are not so easy to discern.

So we have this issue that various events can be conflated together in prophetic announcements, they don't become clear until you get close to the events themselves. There is another issue, and that's the issue of using language understandable at the time of writing to speak of events or realities that have not yet happened. So, God provides an outline of New Covenant events through Isaiah. So, some things about the New Covenant we can see. But God has made known only a limited amount of New Covenant detail. There is so much you can't see from Isaiah's vantage point. So, Isaiah had to communicate the outline of what he did see using the language he had available in his Old Covenant times. Old Testament prophecies, like Egypt, Assyria, and Israel coming together in worship prepare Israel for some kind of revolutionary new conceptualization of what it means to be the people of God, but without providing all the definition that can be needed for that new concept. Isaiah is using Old Covenant language to communicate amazing new realities. But God has not yet provided clarity on the details of that far future reality.

Okay. Now I am ready to suggest a third approach to understanding the fulfillment of prophecies concerning Israel. I am not suggesting that this approach will clear up all the problems. That's the point of what I've just said. I want to insist that there is obscurity in future, especially far-future, prophecy. That's the nature of the prophecy. We should not expect to understand all the details. I do think this third approach provides a better general outline. And that's what the prophecy of the far future does for us, it gives us an outline. And this is what I think the outline is regarding Israel. Prophecies concerning Israel in the New Covenant age refer to the ethnic people Israel, and may also refer to the whole Church in that the specific instance of ethnic Israel implies the larger whole.

That's my way of saying that I think Isaiah is looking ahead to the Church and yet, he is not equating Israel with the Church. The Church will be a spiritual community of peoples from every tribe, nation and language. Ethnic diversity continues to exist in the New Covenant community. We don't all melt together. Our ethnicity is not lost. The church is a gathering of a remnant from all nations. Egyptians, and Assyrians, and Israelites, and Koreans, and Croatians, and Americans, and Portuguese, and Chinese, and Poles, and Turks, and Greeks, and Ukrainians, and Russians, and Ethiopians, and Australians, and Indonesians, and Mexicans, and Argentines, and Belgians, and Germans, the Persians, and on, and on, and on: believers from every specific ethnic group are drawn together to make up a worldwide people of God united by faith in Jesus Christ.

I do not think references of Israel in this chapter, or in the rest of Isaiah, are equivalent to that New Covenant reality. When we refer to Israel I don't think we're talking about the multi-ethnic Church, the New Covenant community. I think reference to Israel is reference to one of the ethnic groups included in that New Covenant reality. You know, at least the believing remnant of Israel is the Israel that's in that group. At the same time, in light of Israel's special, special role in God's historic plan of salvation, I believe that reference to Israel can be a specific instance that implies the whole. So we

This language of shame and humiliation has been used throughout for those who hold to idols and oppose the revealed will of God. You can be angry at God. You can be cynical about God. You can refuse God. You can lift up alternatives to God. But unless you yield in obedient submission to God, you will be put to shame. God is real. Only God can save. He is on that throne in the end. So, no matter how dark things might get, hold on to God. If you rebel against Him or deny Him, you will end in shame. But verse 25 applies to those who hold on.

²⁵ “In the LORD all the offspring of Israel Will be justified and will glory.”

The word “justified” here means, “to be declared right in a court of law.” That is the context Isaiah has envisioned. He called the nations to stand in the court. Those who stand and affirm their allegiance to Yahweh and their trust in Him as Savior, will be vindicated. They will be declared right. That’s what it means to be justified. They will glory in the revelation of Yahweh as Lord and Savior. Those who deny God and turn away from His plan will end up humiliated in their rebellion.

The promise here is to Israel. All the offspring of Israel will be justified and will glory. Paul says something very similar in Romans 11 that I really want to get into. The language of Isaiah helps us understand Paul, and the revelation given through Paul helps us interpret Isaiah. Let’s stop for now, and I will pick up right here in our next lesson to support that idea that Isaiah helps us interpret Paul and Paul, Isaiah, and we will also finish our loose chiasm. We have covered complaint and correction. And we will come back to the final complaint next time.

Lesson 28 Isaiah 46:1-13 God's Plan for Obstinate Israel 2

Introduction

The third major section in the Book of the Servant, the Great Deliverance, is comprised of three parts. The first part focuses on the Cyrus prophecy, God's pre-telling of His plan to use Cyrus to redeem Israel from Babylon; the second part focuses on Israel's response to God's plan to use Cyrus; and the third part focuses on Babylon, the actual destruction of the empire by Cyrus and deliverance of Israel.

We began the second part, Israel's response to God's plan, in our last lesson. We did not get all the way through because I chose to address two major issues connected to Isaiah 45. The first issue is the difficulty of interpreting far future prophecy about Israel. And the second, related, issue is the influence of Isaiah on Paul's thought.

In that lesson, I gave more attention to the difficulty of interpreting prophecy related to Israel. In this lesson, I will give more attention to Isaiah's influence on Paul. That's what I am going to start with in this lesson, Isaiah's influence on Paul. At the end I will quickly walk through chapter 46 to end the section of Israel's response to God's plan.

Isaiah's Influence on Paul

Four allusions to Isaiah 45 in Romans

Paul makes four allusions to Isaiah 45 in his letter to the Romans. I touched on these in our study of chapter 45. Here they are all again as a reminder. First, the potter analogy in Isaiah 45:9.

⁹ "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker— An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth!
Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?'
Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands?'"

Paul makes an allusion to this illustration in Romans 9:20-21,

²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

Second, there is the affirmation in Isaiah 45:17 that those who trust God as Savior will not be shamed.

¹⁷ Israel has been saved by the LORD With an everlasting salvation;
You will not be put to shame or humiliated To all eternity.

The idea that those who trust in God's salvation will not be shamed is alluded to more than once in Romans. It appears quite significantly in the first half of Paul's thesis statement in Romans 1:16.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It's also in Romans 10:10-11.

¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

The third allusion comes from Isaiah's insistence in 45:13 that everyone will bow before the Lord.

That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.

Paul quotes that line in Romans 14:11, writing,

¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God."

Finally, Isaiah asserts in 45:25,

²⁵ "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel Will be justified and will glory."

Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit, And righteousness spring up with it.
I, the LORD, have created it.

Two distinct uses of “righteousness” show up here in verse 8. The first is something God does. It comes from Heaven. “Let the clouds pour down righteousness.” That is a poetic request for God to act, or a poetic recognition that He is acting, or He is going to act. Righteousness is to drip down from Heaven like rain. That righteous action is paralleled with the word, “salvation.” Salvation is an action of God that bears fruit. “Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit.” So the righteous action of God, the saving action of God, is designed to bring about some result, and it is imaged here as fruit. The rain comes on to the Earth, and then the fruit grows up out of the Earth.

The second use of righteousness in verse 8 is not a righteous action that comes from Heaven, but a righteous result that occurs on Earth. The rain of righteousness has fallen on the Earth. The poet calls on that action to bear fruit. What kind of fruit? “And righteousness spring up with it. I, the Lord, have created it.” The righteous, saving action of God results in righteous fruit on Earth created by God. You know, by His righteous action.

We see later in the passage, righteousness is not only what God does or what God creates. Righteousness is also who God is. We see that in 21b and 24a.

Is it not I, the LORD? A righteous God and a Savior;	And There is no other God besides Me, There is none except Me.
²⁴ “They will say of Me,	‘Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.’

So, In verse 21 “righteousness” is used as an adjective (a “righteous God”), and in verse 24 as a virtue (“in the Lord are righteousness and strength”). So, He is a righteous God and a Savior. There, again, is the connection between righteousness and salvation. And only in the Lord are righteousness and strength. So, righteousness can be something God does; you know, let that righteous action pour down. And righteousness can be something that describes who God is. It is a virtue or a quality that God possesses.

We also consider that righteousness can be something God creates. We saw that in that kind of poetic abstract form in verse 8, its fruit rising up. We see it with more clarification in 25b.

²⁵ “In the LORD all the offspring of Israel Will be justified and will glory.”

That word translated in the English here as, “justified,” is from the same root word as all the words translated, “righteousness.” The offspring of Israel will be justified. That is, they will be declared righteous.

Paul did not come up with the idea of justification, of God declaring people righteous. That idea is here in Isaiah. But it is a much earlier idea than Isaiah. God declared, reckoned, considered Abraham righteous by faith back in Genesis 15:6. Paul quotes both in Romans, Genesis 15:6; and Isaiah 45:25.

The different uses of righteousness in Isaiah 45 are all related to one another. We can put the different uses together this way, “God’s righteous act of salvation rains down from Heaven because of God’s righteous character with the result of bearing the fruit of righteousness in His people. Israel will be declared righteous.”

So, now turning to Paul’s use of righteousness and justification language in Romans, we can ask, does Paul mean one and the same thing every time he refers to righteousness in the letter? That’s a fairly significant argument in modern interpretation of Romans. Some interpreters want to insist that the righteousness applies to God. The righteousness of God is about God. And others want to insist that the righteousness of God is something that God does for people. I hope our consideration of the theme in Isaiah 45 would lead us to question the validity of limiting Paul to only one application of the concept of righteousness. Let’s consider his use just briefly.

What does the word, “righteousness,” apply to in the thesis in Romans 1:16-17?

Two different ways to interpret this verse were recognized in our last lesson. We could read Israel as the new Israel, the New Covenant people of God. If “all the offspring of Israel” applies in a spiritual sense to all who place their faith in God or later in New Testament terms, all who place their faith in Jesus Christ, then we easily understand what is meant by “all the offspring of Israel” being justified and glorying in the plan of salvation, because they are the ones who truly believe, from every nation. It’s the New Israel. That would also make sense of Paul’s statement that “all Israel will be saved.” If Paul is using Israel in a metaphorical way to refer to those who truly believe in Jesus, then he is saying that all new Israel, you know, it’s equivalent to the Body of Christ, all the people of God, or all of those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved.

But that does not seem to me at all to be what Paul is saying. And in this case, I think understanding Paul in the context of his argument will help us interpret Isaiah. So, yes, Paul is the one being influenced by Isaiah. Paul comes later. But the reality of far future prophecy about Israel in the Old Testament is that it is sometimes obscured by the lack of revelation yet given. The unfolding of revelation in the New Testament available to Paul allows us to read him and then go back and clarify some things that were not clear in Old Testament prophecy. And that’s true in this case. Paul’s teaching about Israel occurs in a New Covenant context. As such, it helps us narrow down some of the possible interpretations of Isaiah.

I can’t going through in detail the flow of Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11. That would take way too long. Again, that is in my Romans podcast. I will just outline my conclusion regarding Israel here to see how it helps us with Isaiah 45. First, here is my conclusion, and then I’ll give some supporting points. When Paul refers to Israel in Romans 9-11, he does not do so as a spiritual metaphor. That is my conclusion. In all eleven references, he is speaking of ethnic Israel descended from Abraham through Isaac. In the first half of the section starting in chapter 9, Paul unmask’s Israel’s presumption, arguing that they have misunderstood God’s mercy as the basis for anyone to be declared His people. And they have misunderstood God’s acceptance of all through faith. So, mercy and faith. Then, having lamented over the rejection of most Israelites from salvation in Christ, Paul goes on to make a double argument for why Israel has not stumbled so as to fall completely out of God’s ongoing plan. His first argument is that a remnant of Jews actually are saved and are included in the present New Covenant people of God. And Paul argues himself as an example. “I’m a Jew. I believe in Jesus. All Israel has not fallen out of God’s plan.” Second, God does still have a future plan for Israel. When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, “all Israel will be saved.” That’s not a general reference to the Church. It’s not, “When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, all the people of God will be saved.” It’s a specific reference to the people of Israel.

Does that mean all Israelites through all time will be saved? No. That’s clearly not the case throughout Romans. Only those Jews who believe in Jesus will be saved. So, why say, “all” Israel? Paul may be including all Jews who will come to faith in Jesus, the remnant now and more in the future. All of Israel that believes will be saved. They have not fallen out of God’s plan.

I think it may mean even more than that. I believe it possible that Paul is looking ahead to a significant revival of Jews. There is only a remnant of Jews who believe kind of through the present age, while most obstinately refuse to accept the Gospel as God’s plan of salvation. But in the future there will be a revival among Jews and a great number will embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe that is a reasonable way to understand Paul’s argument regarding Israel in Romans 9-11. That is my conclusion about how to interpret this.

Here are some points to back that up before looking at the parallel passages in Isaiah.

(1) In Romans 4, when Paul speaks of Abraham’s children, he does not speak of Gentile and Jew indistinguishably as Abraham’s children by faith. He maintains a distinction of Abraham being the father of those who believed without being circumcised (Gentiles), and those who believe while being circumcised (Jews). We are all Abraham’s children. But that does not erase our ethnic distinctions.

(2) The word, "Israel," is not used in Romans except in chapters 9-11. The first ten uses of "Israel" refer clearly to the ethnic people of Israel, not to a metaphor for the Church; not for the New Israel. So, unless we can prove from the context that Paul has switched to a metaphoric use of Israel in just the eleventh case, we should interpret that eleventh use of the word, "Israel," in 11:26 just like all the other ones: as ethnic Israel.

(3) The word, "all," causes some problems because it could be interpreted to mean every single Israelite through all time will be saved. But that interpretation does not fit the context of Paul's argument. He has firmly established through the whole letter that salvation only comes through faith in Jesus Christ, and he has reestablished that truth in this very section. In the chapter 9, beginning of chapter 10, "They have not known the righteousness of God because they are seeking their own righteousness." The whole lament at the beginning of chapter 9 is there because Paul doesn't believe that every Jewish name is written in the Book of Life.

(4) "All" can be taken to mean a significant majority, like, "all of Croatia came out to cheer the national team after the World Cup." That does not mean that literally every single Croat showed up. But if you watch the YouTube videos, it certainly feels like every single Croat showed up. In that sense, all is comprehensive, meaning, a majority, or, a whole lot of people. That interpretation of, "all Israel," fits well with the argument that Paul has in mind a significant number of Israelites, and that God will surely save all those Israelites who have believed in Him. Israel has not been set aside.

So now back to Isaiah and the wrapping up of this third theme that all Israel will be saved. The language appears twice in Isaiah 45. First in 45:17.

¹⁷ Israel has been saved by the LORD	With an everlasting salvation;
You will not be put to shame or humiliated	To all eternity.

And then in 45:25 the concluding verse.

²⁵ "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel	Will be justified and will glory."
--	------------------------------------

I'll make three points that I believe are significant to interpreting this promise of salvation for Israel in Isaiah. First, even though the main focus in these chapters is on the national deliverance of Israel after exile to Babylon, the language of "everlasting salvation" points us beyond physical deliverance to spiritual deliverance. This is a promise that Israel can surely depend on the spiritual, eternal salvation of God.

Tiny, exiled Israel will not be put to shame for holding onto Yahweh, even though she is greatly outnumbered by a multitudes of gods in a multitude of greater and more influential nations. God alone is true. God alone is able to save. The emphasis on an everlasting salvation is an emphasis on the power and faithfulness of God to provide exactly what he Has promised to those who will trust in His plan. So, that's the first point. We are now talking about our salvation from sin and death to eternal life with God, based on His ability to fulfill His promises.

Second, the comprehensiveness of the language, "Israel has been saved," and, "all the offspring of Israel," emphasizes the comprehensiveness of the salvation. All the way through Isaiah we have been made aware that God will judge Israel and only a remnant will experience the blessing of salvation. So, as in Romans 9-11, the comprehensiveness of these verses is not meant to overdo that message. Every Israelite is not going to be saved. All of Israel that trusts in Yahweh and His plan will not be shamed in their commitment to Yahweh. They will be saved with an eternal salvation.

Third, who is Israel here? The two main interpretations disagree over whether Israel here is a reference to the whole people of God - Jew and Gentile - or whether Israel here is ethnic Israel.

And the two primary commentators I have been using throughout this series, Motyer and Oswalt, disagree with one another along the lines of those two possibilities. Motyer is the first. He argues that Isaiah has expanded the term "Israel" to include all the faithful, Jew and Gentile. Every knee that bows in faith has become the offspring of Israel. Here are two quotes from Motyer, the first commenting on verse 17, and the second on verse 25.

The great name Israel must now include the saved of the Gentile world. The link between *Savior* (15) and *saved ... salvation* (17) demands this. A narrower reference excluding the world-wide dimension would be inadmissible.⁵⁶

A merely national significance of *Israel* would make nonsense of the whole argument of this passage. As in verse 17, the honored name now casts its mantle over a world-wide confessional community. The words *descendants*/'seed of' indicate reality and co-equality of membership [...]. Turning to the Lord (22) confers birthright (*cf.* Gal. 3:7, 29).⁵⁷

To be fair to this position I should mention that Motyer also quotes Paul's words in Galatians 3:7 and 29 that, "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

Still, I take a different view from Motyer on this one. I agree that Isaiah 45 includes an invitation to every people, most clearly expressed in verse 22, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth." But I disagree that Israel is then used as an inclusive reference to all who will eventually believe. I do not think it is required in Isaiah 45, and I believe that Paul's careful development in Romans of both Jew and Gentile as members of God's people describes a unity that is able to maintain ethnic distinction and the special role of Israel.

Here is a quote from Oswalt set in tension to Motyer. Notice how Oswalt maintains a distinction between the world and Israel. They are not the same thing.

The only hope for Israel and the world is in the Lord. [...] What will convince the world of God's sole lordship? It is his power in deliverance, his absolute faithfulness to his promises, the utter reliability of all he has said. This characteristic, in contrast to the failure of the gods to keep their promises, will bring all the world to the Lord's feet, ashamed of the false trust that we have reposed in the works of our own hands. [...] When the world finally does admit that its gods are nothing and Israel's god is all, that the only hope of salvation is in him, what will the true Israel's position be? Arrogance and overweening pride? Far from it. Just as the nations have bowed at the feet of the Lord in submission and confession, so Israel will know that its only boast is in the Lord. He is the one who has vindicated them and who is glorified in them. In themselves there is no good thing. All that is meritorious in them is as a result of who God is and what he has done in them.⁵⁸

I believe the faithfulness of God in keeping His promise to Israel is a specific example of the faithfulness of God to keep His promise to all people. So, yes, all who believe in God for salvation will be justified. But that general truth is not the emphasis of verse 25. The emphasis of verse 25 is that all the offspring of Israel will be justified. That is not a rejection of Gentile inclusion into the people of God. It is a specific and representative example of a salvation that is made available to all peoples. Motyer is correct in arguing that all who believe are, in some sense, Abraham's children. Though I believe he is wrong here to apply such a universal definition.

All of Israel's offspring will be saved. That is a promise to those Israelites who believe and hold on to Yahweh. They will be declared righteous because of their faith in God, and they will no longer be obstinate vessels rejecting the work of the potter. They will not remain obstinate. That's the beauty of this verse. They will, all of Israel's offspring will be justified and glory. That's a total change of heart. They will glory in Him with hearts of wonder at who God is, and gratitude at the great salvation He has provided for them. And they will gain the hearts of worshippers. And they who believe will welcome the inclusion of all peoples from the ends of the Earth, who come streaming into Zion with them.

God's faithfulness to Israel expressed here to keep His promise of eternal salvation becomes a specific example that witnesses to everyone who believes in Jesus. God saves. He remained true to Israel. He always remains eternally true to His promises. That's true of Israel. That's true of everybody.

⁵⁶ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 364.

⁵⁷ Motyer, 367.

⁵⁸ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 225.

We began this section with obstinate Israel's refusal of God's plan in 45:9-10. Now in the center, we see God's promise to save extended out to all who come to Him. Israel experiences that salvation and glories in God and His plan. Change of heart. That is verse 25. But that change of heart happened in Israel's offspring. And we're going to go back and end the section in 46:12-13 with present, stubborn Israel refusing to accept God's plan. Maybe Isaiah does that to emphasize God's mercy in bringing about salvation in spite of His own people. Yeah, they are obstinate. God is going to change their heart. But don't forget that they're obstinate. Changed. Obstinate.

Let's quickly walk through the text of chapter 46 to wrap up this section on Israel's response to God's plan. The chapter divides into two main parts. Verses 1-7 develop the contrast set up in 45:20-21 between the gods of the nations who cannot save, and Yahweh who is Savior. Verses 8-13 then bring us back to the specific instance of national salvation from Babylon through Cyrus, and God's intention to fulfill that promise, even in the face of obstinacy from His people.

Rebellious people: the Inflexible Lord 46:1-13

God bears the burden 1-7

The first section of chapter 46 divides into a simple chiasmic structure of gods as a burden, Yahweh as the burden-bearer, and back to gods as a burden. In verses 1-2 the gods of Babylon, Bel and Nebo, are the burden.

¹ Bel has bowed down, Their images are consigned to the beasts and the cattle.	Nebo stoops over; The things that you carry are burdensome,
---	--

A load for the weary beast.

² They stooped over, they have bowed down together;	They could not rescue the burden,
---	-----------------------------------

But have themselves gone into captivity.

Far from saving the people of Babylon from the invading Persians, the idol-gods will be loaded up on beasts of burden themselves and carried out of the city into captivity. In contrast, God reminds Israel that He has been carrying her all along. God is the burden-bearer. He carries Israel. He carries you. In these verses, Israel is the burden. Verses 3-5.

³ "Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, You who have been borne by Me from birth	And all the remnant of the house of Israel, And have been carried from the womb;
⁴ Even to your old age I will be the same, I have done it, and I will carry you;	And even to your graying years I will bear you! And I will bear you and I will deliver you.
⁵ "To whom would you liken Me and make Me equal	Compare Me, that we would be alike?

This is the truth. And it requires faith. Israel experiences hard times and defeats. The ultimate shame will come when Babylon destroys the Temple. The Babylonians cannot carry God off because he is not represented by any physical form, but they will carry off all the valuable utensils used in Temple worship. And they will burn down God's house. Even so, God declares, I have carried you. Do you understand that? Do you understand that I am the one who carries, even through the valley of shadow of death? Do you believe that?

To whom will we liken God? Is he a made god, fashioned physically and conceptually out of human imagination, or is He the God who makes? Verses 6-7 return to the made gods who must be carried.

⁶ "Those who lavish gold from the purse Hire a goldsmith, They bow down,	And weigh silver on the scale and he makes it into a god; indeed they worship it.
⁷ "They lift it upon the shoulder and carry it;	They set it in its place and it stands there.
It does not move from its place.	
Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer;	It cannot deliver him from his distress.

The gods of our own imagination are always a burden. They don't carry our burdens for us. They become a burden on us. I think of the modern god of self-determination. You can define yourself any way you want. You can be whatever you declare you are. You create your own destiny. What a heavy spiritual, emotional, and psychological burden to be laid on anybody, especially on young people. It may sound wonderful, in a sense, to our independent, self-centered natures. I'm the captain of my soul. I am what I want to be. But really, are you? Can you define yourself? Can you even know who you are? Can you unravel your heart and your sin? Can you know goodness? Can you know what's at the center of you? Who you're really meant to be? And how is it that you can make your own destiny? I mean, what power do you have to control the flow of this life, much less the reality of death and what comes after? What a burdensome god this modern god is! "Define yourself!" it says. And yet, it is impotent to fulfill and impotent to save. The made gods are a burden.

God fulfills his purposes 8-13

The second half of the chapter insists that Yahweh alone can in all certainty declare His purposes and execute them. He does not rely on us to carry out His plans. We don't carry Him: He carries us. He makes it happen. And we return here to the specific plan to use Cyrus in 46:8-11, and then we end with Israel's rejection of that plan in 12-13.

⁸ "Remember this, and be assured;	Recall it to mind, you transgressors.
⁹ "Remember the former things long past,	
For I am God, and there is no other;	I am God, and there is no one like Me,
¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning,	And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, 'My purpose will be established,	And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';
¹¹ Calling a bird of prey from the east,	The man of My purpose from a far country.
Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass.	I have planned it, surely I will do it.

God proclaims what will be, and in His own time He makes it to be. He establishes His purpose and accomplishes His good pleasure. Cyrus is the specific example here. The man nobody heard of, in a country nobody would have included, with the power structures to take over after the Assyrians fell. But God sees ahead, and God will make it be. God will call the man of His purpose from a far country. This shepherd messiah will not be a Jew. He is likened to a bird of prey from the east. Persia is to the east. Cyrus will swoop up and then down on Mesopotamia from the north. He will be a man of war. And like it or not, he is the one who will set the Israelites free. That is God's plan.

Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.

God knows they will not like it. They will worry over whether or not God has abandoned His promises to the house of David. They will resist this Gospel plan. God will do it anyway. Verses 12-13.

¹² "Listen to Me, you stubborn-minded,	Who are far from righteousness.
¹³ "I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off;	And My salvation will not delay.
And I will grant salvation in Zion,	And My glory for all Israel.

C. S. Lewis describes his salvation experience as "one who came dragging and kicking." Or was it "dragging and screaming"? God's glory will be made known to Israel in the way God chooses to make it known, in spite of their obstinacy. "I will bring my righteousness near. My salvation will not delay. I will grant salvation for Zion." Thank the Lord that His plan does not depend on our understanding or our approval. He will provide salvation. That's the plan. This Cyrus is not the Messiah. He is a forerunner of the Messiah. He brings national redemption. He does not bring spiritual, eternal redemption. The true Messiah will also be rejected. In fact, the plan of salvation depends on it. He will be resisted, rejected, and crucified. Nothing can thwart the plan of God. This is the plan. And death cannot hold Him. And no matter how hard God's people stumble, He will make a way to bring them home, to turn their hearts to Him in the end. This is his promise.

²⁵ "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel Will be justified and will glory."

Lesson 29 Isaiah 47:1-15 Babylon Conquered

Introduction

Isaiah's description of the Great Deliverance in chapters 44-48 takes us through three different perspectives of the same event. This is prophecy at such a high level. One hundred years before the event, God pinpoints with precision this major, major event in salvation history. This is not the first time the Bible has announced what is to come. God foretold through Moses in Deuteronomy that Israel would experience both the curse of exile and the grace of restoration. "When all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind...in all the nations where the Lord your God has banished you...the Lord your God will restore you from captivity..." That's Deuteronomy 30. That's Moses.

That prophecy came 800 years in advance. God's Old Covenant test case with Israel is going to fail. Just as God knew before he created Adam and Eve that they would fail to be faithful, God also knew that after He established the nation of Israel at Sinai, they would fail to be faithful. Through 800 years, generations of Israelites wandered away from God, came back to God, wandered away, came back. God's people continually pushed the limits of His grace and mercy. That limit will finally and irrevocably be breached and the prophecy of wrath fulfilled. God will spit the Israelites out of the land, just as he did Amorites before them. That moment of justice will be carried out by Babylon. Isaiah adds that detail to the prophecy. Babylon will be God's instrument. Judah will be exiled. But just as Moses prophesied, Isaiah also prophesies redemption after the exile. There will be a new Exodus. A future generation will be brought safely home.

Isaiah sees these two crucial mileposts in salvation history, the curse of sin culminating in the exile of Judah; followed by the grace of God to restore Israel after a new Exodus. Isaiah is describing this great deliverance through three prophetic perspectives. We could label these perspectives as beginning, middle, and end. All three look to the future. At the beginning we get the Cyrus prophecy, that specific and unbelievable declaration of restoration through an unknown leader named, Cyrus. The Cyrus prophecy foresees the rescue from Babylon of an already defeated Israel.

Isaiah began with the Cyrus prophecy. He then shifted to the middle perspective of Israel's response to that plan. God treats Israel's obstinate resistance with a firm stance. The same elements present in the beginning perspective are also present in the middle perspective. Judah is defeated, exiled to Babylon, they're free from Babylon, and Israel is restored. God will not give up on Israel, in spite of Israel.

First, the prophecy, then the response, now the fulfillment. That is beginning, middle, and end. This third perspective assumes again the defeat of Judah; the exile to Babylon; freedom from Babylon; and the restoration of Israel, but from the perspective of the end: the perspective of the actual defeat of Babylon and the actual release of the Jews. So first, we had the Cyrus prophecy. Then we had Israel's response. Now in this lesson we are considering the actual fall of Babylon and the release of the Jews.

This third perspective has those two adjoining parts, the fall of Babylon in chapter 47; and the corresponding release of Israel in chapter 48.

The Fall of Babylon 47:1-15

We begin with chapter 47, the fall of Babylon.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ¹ "Come down and sit in the dust,
Sit on the ground without a throne,
For you shall no longer be called | O virgin daughter of Babylon;
O daughter of the Chaldeans!
tender and delicate. |
| ² "Take the millstones and grind meal.
Uncover the leg, cross the rivers. | Remove your veil, strip off the skirt, |
| ³ "Your nakedness will be uncovered,
I will take vengeance | Your shame also will be exposed;
and will not spare a man." |

This is not primarily a prophecy of what will happen to the women of Babylon. This is a depiction of Babylon herself through the metaphor of a queen who has tumbled from the height of her throne to the lowest of lows, a slave departing into exile. She is tender and delicate because of her great wealth. She holds a privileged position. But she will sit on the ground without a throne. She will sit in the dust of shame and mourning. To take a millstone and grind meal is to do the work of a slave. To remove veil and skirt is to be stripped down like a slave. To cross the rivers is to go into exile as a slave. The uncovering of her nakedness, and the exposure of her shame depicts a wealthy woman stripped of her garments and dressed as a slave. Taken in strongest terms, that metaphor suggests the brutality of rape. Babylon will be ravished by an invading army.

And this is justice. We will find out why in the next stanza. This stanza ends not with the “why”, but with the “who.” God pours this wrath out on Babylon. And He does so in accordance with His nature. That nature is revealed in the name Isaiah declares in verse 4, “Our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel.” Consider the parts of that name. He is redeemer. That is one who buys back. Israel has been sold. God will buy them back. It is also the term used for the nearest relative who has the right and responsibility to buy back. God has a close, ongoing relationship with Israel that has not ended. She has been sold into slavery. He is kinsman-redeemer. He holds the right of redemption. His name is also, “Lord of hosts” or, “Yahweh of hosts.” Yahweh is the covenant God of Abraham and Moses. The tight connection between Israel and Yahweh. Yahweh of hosts leads a spiritual army into battle. That’s the host. Redeemer, Yahweh of hosts, and also the Holy One of Israel. His nature is holy, set apart as pure and glorious. His holiness is specifically revealed through His relationship with Israel. He is the Holy One of Israel. Hebrew temple worship sets God apart as One who cannot be depicted with an idol. There is no idol in the Hebrew Temple. The moral code, the holiness code, Leviticus 19:20, “Be holy as your God is holy.” That was intended to set Israel apart is a reflection of the Lord’s good and holy nature.

Who causes Babylon the Queen to sit in the dust? Israel’s kinsman redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, Yahweh who made covenant long ago and who leads an unconquerable host into battle. That is who will make her sit in the dust.

The next stanza provides Babylon with the reason for her humiliation.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>⁵ “Sit silently, and go into darkness,
For you will no longer be called</p> <p>⁶ “I was angry with My people,
You did not show mercy to them,</p> <p>⁷ “Yet you said, ‘I will be a queen forever.’</p> | <p>O daughter of the Chaldeans,
The queen of kingdoms.
I profaned My heritage
And gave them into your hand.
On the aged you made your yoke very heavy.
These things you did not consider
Nor remember the outcome of them.</p> |
|--|--|

This stanza continues the image of Babylon as Queen. The Hebrew word can be translated literally as, “lady of kingdoms.” It doesn’t have to be, “queen of kingdoms.” But the reference to throne in the earlier stanza and Babylon’s status as an empire, as suzerain over vassal nations affirms the translation, “Queen of Kingdoms.” That’s what we’re supposed to be thinking. But she will be queen no longer. She must sit as she is told in silence, like a slave. She will be taken into darkness, forgotten.

God explains her humiliation. Babylon’s victory over Judah was fundamentally an act of God. God was judged His people for their persistent wickedness. God chose to profane Israel, His own heritage, rather than let Israel continue to degrade His name. The execution of God’s just judgment was appointed to Babylon. If God called Babylon to destroy Jerusalem, how can He now hold Babylon accountable for the destruction of Jerusalem? The short answer is that He does not. God does not find Babylon guilty of destroying Jerusalem, burning down His and carrying the Jews into exile. That was God’s plan. Babylon was His servant. For what, then, is Babylon guilty of? Two accusations are

made here. First, they are guilty for how they treated the Jews after having defeated them. “You did not show mercy to them, on the aged you made your yoke very heavy.”

But there is a second, deeper, reason God holds Babylon accountable. Babylon’s treatment of Israel is symptomatic of a heart problem. She never acknowledged God as God. She never came to see herself as subservient. She gave credit to her own power, abilities, and wisdom. She misunderstood why it was that God appointed her to judge Israel. She failed to understand the lesson of God’s discipline. If God would exile His own chosen people for their sins, what would He do to any nation that claims independence from Him and superiority over Him? Babylon failed to see that she, also, needs mercy from God. And in her not showing mercy to those captive, she shows she doesn’t imagine any need for mercy for herself.

⁷ “Yet you said, ‘I will be a queen forever.’ These things you did not consider
Nor remember the outcome of them.

Babylon did not consider that what she had done to Judah ought to also be done to her, too, if she refused submission to the true and holy Lord of hosts. Babylon’s attitude here transitions us into the second part of the poem, from Babylon’s humiliation to Babylon’s hubris.

Babylon’s hubris (8-11)

The two stanza’s calling out Babylon’s hubris are connected by the Hebrew word translated in verse 8 as, “securely”; and verse 10 as, “secure.” The stanzas are also connected by the repeated claim “You have said in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’” That is hubris. Here is the first stanza, verses 8-9.

⁸ “Now, then, hear this, you sensual one, Who dwells securely,
Who says in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me.
I will not sit as a widow, Nor know loss of children.’
⁹ “But these two things will come on you suddenly in one day:
Loss of children and widowhood. They will come on you in full measure
In spite of your many sorceries, In spite of the great power of your spells.

“Now then” indicates a connection to what has gone before. Babylon has not considered God or the consequences of her lifestyle. She is described in the first verset here as “a sensual one,” translated in different English Bibles as, “a lover of luxury”; “lover of pleasure”; “wanton creature”; “pampered one.” She loves her lifestyle of wealth and luxury. She has experienced security. She is a mighty empire, and she assumes she will continue to dwell safely. Her problem is internal. She says in her heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” That’s a direct contrast to this declaration about God that we have heard repeatedly from Isaiah, most recently in 46:9, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.” Imagine the hubris, the pride, of Babylon to claim the same for herself. Instead of believing in the sovereign uniqueness of God, she believes in the sovereign uniqueness of herself, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” She is central to her own world. The purpose of existence is to love herself. She determines her own destiny, “I will not sit as a widow, nor know loss of children.” And that is a comment about being defeated in battle. Her men will not die. There will be no widows. The young men who go into war will not be lost. There will be no loss of children.

Verse 9 directly contradicts that claim. She will lose children, and she will become a widow. The losses of military defeat. And it will happen suddenly, as if in a day. There is no self-determined security for human beings over the long run. Every nation is dependent on the will of God for continued existence. An invading force will come on Babylon. Her sorceries and spells cannot prevent it. That’s an interesting statement.

In this last line of verse 9 we are encountering a shift from the usual perspective Isaiah uses when attacking man-made religion. To this point, the nations have been characterized by dependence on false gods that cannot save. Isaiah has focused his polemic on the impotent nature of the idol-gods. They are not real gods. Now here in verse 9 he is still denouncing the same man-made religion of

Babylon, but now from the perspective of human practice. This is the science-magic-ritual behavior the Babylonians use to manipulate the gods and control their own fate.

The earlier claim in verse 8 that Babylon is “a sensual one” or “a lover of luxury” is not the same thing as calling her secular, or without concern for the spiritual. She loves the material, yes. But she is also very much concerned with the spiritual as a means of maintaining power in the material world and experiencing pleasure in the material world. Isaiah will address this as we go on. Here tells Babylon, “In spite of your many sorceries, in spite of the great power of your spells,” you will be overcome.

The second stanza in this part about Babylon’s hubris, verses 10 and 11, follows the same contrasting pattern as verses 8 and 9. Verse 10 reveals Babylon’s heart, and verse 11 reveals the consequences.

10	“You felt secure in your wickedness and said, Your wisdom and your knowledge, For you have said in your heart,	‘No one sees me,’ they have deluded you; ‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’
11	“But evil will come on you And disaster will fall on you And destruction about which you do not know	Which you will not know how to charm away; For which you cannot atone; Will come on you suddenly.

Babylon is not without wisdom. She has a store of knowledge in science, and engineering, and architecture, and warfare. She has a developed religion inherited from the ancient Sumerian culture. But her knowledge of the physical and spiritual world has deluded her. She denies accountability to any higher power. “No one sees me.” Again she says in her heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” That’s not a claim that she is the only kingdom that exists. It’s not a claim that there are no gods. It is a claim that she is unique. She is sovereign. No one else rises to her level. Certainly, no one stands above who might see and judge. Her gods do her bidding.

Isaiah declares this belief delusional in verse 11. Evil will come on you. You cannot charm your way out of it. You cannot atone for your sin. It will come and come suddenly. Your pride will not save you. We transitioned first from Babylon’s humiliation to Babylon’s hubris. Now we transition again to Babylon’s helplessness.

Babylon’s helplessness (12-15)

These final two stanzas are connected by a focus on Babylon’s religious experts, by a play on the words “stand” and “sit,” and by the word “save,” that appears in the last verset of each stanza. The first stanza is in 12 and 13.

12	“Stand fast now in your spells With which you have labored from your youth; Perhaps you will be able to profit,	And in your many sorceries Perhaps you may cause trembling.
13	“You are wearied with your many counsels; Those who predict by the new moons,	Let now the astrologers, those who prophesy by the stars, Stand up and save you from what will come upon you.

Ancient Near Eastern generals are well known for looking for spiritual signs before engaging a battle. They took the entrails of sheep, or a crow flying across a field, or an eclipse, or a comet, or the alignment of the stars, they took it very seriously. Battles were not fought and won on the Earth. The Earth mirrored a spiritual battle among the gods of warring nations. Warfare is just a specific example of this connection between material and spiritual. Success in agriculture, trade, family, every significant human endeavor depended on a positive connection to the spiritual realm. That does not discount human endeavor. Human beings were rightly rewarded by the gods for heroism and ingenuity. Astrology is a good example of the marriage of science and spirituality. The Babylonians were famous for their charting of the stars, their science. At the same time, they charted the stars to discover and manipulate the future. Magic involves practices on Earth that manipulate gods and spiritual powers. So, science, magic, ritual – it all comes together for Babylon.

¹⁰ “You felt secure in your wickedness and said,
Your wisdom and your knowledge,
For you have said in your heart,

‘No one sees me,’
they have deluded you;
‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’

That is the heart of human kind. We can do without God. Through our own wisdom and knowledge, through our political systems, our own economic systems, our own spiritual systems, we can create our own definition and ensure our own destiny. And the more a particular kingdom or nations on Earth succeeds, the more confidence, the more pride she places in her own political, economic and religious culture.

John the Apostle understood this prophecy about Babylon. He understood that it pointed to a general principle about human society. Through the last book of the Bible John uses the metaphor of Babylon to speak about Rome, to speak about Rome’s political, economic and religious systems, because at the time of John’s writing Rome was the great, specific, historic example of the City of Man that comes into conflict with the City of God, and at that time the City of God is the Church. At the same time that Babylon served John as a metaphor for Rome, his apocalyptic description does what Isaiah’s poetry does. It elevates his vision above any one historical instance to point us toward the ongoing spiritual reality of conflict between the world and God: between the City of Man and Zion. Here is a paragraph from John that quotes Isaiah directly. This is Revelation 18:1-8. I will skip through the text to emphasize the connection to Isaiah 47.

¹ After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. ² And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! ... Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues; ⁵ for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities... ⁷ To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously, to the same degree give her torment and mourning; for she says in her heart, ‘I SIT AS A QUEEN AND I AM NOT A WIDOW, and will never see mourning.’ ⁸ For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong.

The City of Man grows confident in her successes. But all the grand systems she develops to ensure wealth and security will in a day come crumbling down. Isaiah says not only to Babylon, Isaiah says to the City of Man, to the heart of the Tower of Babel, “Stand up! Embrace your science! Embrace your spiritualism! Embrace your rituals, religious and otherwise, and see how you do! It’s all going to end in a lake of fire.” This is will not be a fire that you sit and warm yourself by. This is a fire that will consume human wickedness and sin. Self-definition and self-determination are illusions. In the end, every human advisor, guru, professor, politician, priest, will have “wandered in his own way.” You will find that, in the City of Man, “there is none to save you.”

John says, “Come out of Babylon. Come out of the City of Man. Well, that’s what’s going to happen to Israel. There is another half to this perspective of the prophecy. At the same time that Babylon falls, Israel is redeemed. Israel is released. We will consider the release in chapter 48 in our next lesson.

The verb, “hear,” or, “listen,” in verse 12 is singular, directed at the personified nation Israel. The call to listen in Scripture always assumes not only hearing of God’s word, but also obedience to God’s word. That’s the kind of listening expected. In this case, Israel is to submit to the reality of God’s nature as sovereign over the whole creation. A second commandment to listen is issued in verses 14-15.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>¹⁴ “Assemble, all of you, and listen!
The LORD loves him; he will carry out His good
pleasure</p> | <p>Who among them has declared these things?
on Babylon, and His arm will be against the
Chaldeans.</p> |
| <p>¹⁵ “I, even I, have spoken; indeed I have called him,</p> | <p>I have brought him, and will make his ways
successful.</p> |

The verb, “listen,” is plural this time, calling on every individual member of the nation. So the first “listen” was to the whole group; the second “listen” is to every member of the group. Listen and embrace this truth. First, Yahweh is sovereign Lord over creation. Second, Yahweh is sovereign Lord over history. He has declared something that is going to happen, and He is going to carry out His good pleasure. God will raise up a leader who will defeat Babylon. God has spoken. He is Lord of history. It will be. Listen to this! Embrace it! Live by it!

A third command to listen is given in verse 16. This one is also plural, directed again at all the individuals who make up the nation Israel.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>¹⁶ “Come near to Me, listen to this:

And now the Lord GOD</p> | <p>From the first I have not spoken in secret,
From the time it took place, I was there.

has sent Me, and His Spirit.”</p> |
|--|---|

The first three versets in this verse communicate a fairly clear meaning. The last two versets are a bit confusing. Let’s start with the first three versets. The first is the call to listen: listen to this. The second is a declaration that God has not spoken in secret. This is a consistent Biblical theme. God’s words are not mystical, opaque, obscure, unknowable. Some are, but the great majority is not. God speaks with plain, real life language in order that His people, if they would pay attention to what He is saying, they can understand it. Sometimes He does not give us all the information we want. But if we don’t concentrate on what God has not said and concentrate on what God has said, we can understand a great part of it. God does not speak in secret. We understand: Israel will be defeated and exiled to Babylon. A man named Cyrus will come to power and defeat Babylon. Israel will be freed and return to rebuild Jerusalem. None of that is secret, mystical, symbolic language.

Then in the third verset, God declares, “From the time it took place, I was there.” God spoke at some earlier time. He didn’t keep the thing a secret. And later, God was present, He was there when His spoken word came true. “I spoke it. And then I was there to carry it out.” God perseveres in faithfulness to see His promises realized.

Now we come to the two versets of 16b. “And now the Lord GOD has sent Me, and His Spirit.” God does not speak in secret, but there are times when His word is not so easy to interpret. And the question here is, “Who said that? Who is speaking?” God spoke in 16a. That was clear. But 16b claims, “the Lord GOD has sent me, and His Spirit.” Who is saying that? It could be Cyrus, speaking, “God has sent me.”

Oswalt and Motyer provide two better options. Oswalt thinks this is the prophet Isaiah speaking. 16a tells us that God has spoken. And in 16b the prophet claims that the words he writes are those words that God has spoken. He has been sent by the Lord GOD with a message, and by His Spirit. That would fit well with Isaiah’s call described back in 6:9, where God commissions Isaiah, “Go and tell this people...” Motyer, on the other hand, understands this verset as pointing ahead to the true Servant who takes center stage in chapters 49-55. The prophecy of God is both unsurprising and surprising. He will set Israel free through Cyrus, but He will do more than that. Something new is coming that wasn’t made fully clear ahead of time, a different kind of servant sent from God the Father and by the Holy Spirit. That servant is the one speaking here, foreshadowing the three servant songs to come. Either interpretation, the prophet or the servant, could work here.

The number of the songs in this section might be a little confusing. We have three parts and each part begins with a Servant song. But our first Servant Song occurred back in 42:1-4. So, now, in this section the first part does not start with the first Servant Song. It is the second Servant Song. And the second part will begin with the third Servant Song; and the third part will begin with the fourth Servant Song. That fourth Servant Song is the famous of all the Servant Songs, and that's what we're building towards.

Each of the Servant Songs includes a spiritual need that must be met and that will be met by a servant. Each of the Servant Songs also describes that servant as a new kind of servant. This is not the servant Israel, described as blind and wanting. This is not the servant who comes with military might to defeat Israel's earthly enemies. This is a different kind of servant of whom we get a growing picture as we move through each song.

In this lesson, we will cover the Second Servant song in 49:1-6, God's comment confirming the Servant in 49:7-13, and the comment regarding Israel's response in 49:14-50:3. Before we jump into the text, let us start with a reminder of what we already know about the Servant from the first Servant Song in 42:1-4 and the accompanying confirmation from the Lord in 42:5-9.

The need highlighted in that song is justice on the Earth. That need is mentioned three times through the song, "He will bring forth justice for the nations... he will faithfully bring forth justice... he will not be disheartened or crushed until he has established justice in the earth." The need is not limited to Israel. This Servant will be "a light to the nations."

The Servant is described in terms that point us toward a unique kind of Servant. God describes him as "One in whom my soul delights. I have put my Spirit upon him." That language of justice and of the spirit of connect this new kind of servant with the new kind of King from our previous book. In Isaiah 9:6 we were told this new King would establish His ever-increasing Kingdom with justice and righteousness. We were also told in 11:2 that "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him." There is another phrase that makes this Servant stand out. We were told He will be appointed as a "covenant to the people." That's odd language. How is a person a covenant? It's something unique.

Along with the unique way the Servant is described, we learn more about Him as His task is explained. The need is a need for justice, but it does not sound like the implementation of political or military justice. This Servant does not carry out His mission through force.

² "He will not cry out or raise *His voice*,
³ "A bruised reed He will not break

Nor make His voice heard in the street.
And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish;

What will He accomplish? He will be a light to the nations, He will open blind eyes, He will bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and He will release those who dwell in darkness. The Lord ends His confirmation of the Servant with the declaration that He is declaring new things, before they come to be. That may mean that God is simply declaring ahead of time the future details about the Servant to come. It can also mean that He is pointing ahead with some details to a revelation that will only be fully made known at that future date. When this Servant shows up, it will be a new thing.

That's what we know so far about this Servant, this "covenant of the people." Let's see what Isaiah now wants to reveal in the second song and following comments. Let's start with just the text of the song, Isaiah 49:1-6.

The Second Servant Song: The Servant's Scope is Israel and the World (49:1-6).

¹ Listen to Me, O islands,
The LORD called Me from the womb;
² He has made My mouth like a sharp sword,
And He has also made Me a select arrow,
³ He said to Me, "You are My Servant,
⁴ But I said, "I have toiled in vain,
Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD,

And pay attention, you peoples from afar.
From the body of My mother He named Me.
In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me;
He has hidden Me in His quiver.
Israel, in Whom I will show My glory."
I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity;
And My reward with My God."

⁵ And now says the LORD,
To bring Jacob back to Him,
(For I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
⁶ He says, "It is too small a thing that You should
be My Servant

who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant,
so that Israel might be gathered to Him
And My God is My strength),
To raise up the tribes of Jacob

and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of
the earth."

The need described in this song is to bring Jacob back to the Lord, to gather Israel to God. Jacob is to be raised up, Israel is to be restored. That language might apply to the national redemption of Israel. But we ended chapter 48 with the warning that there is no peace for the wicked. Israel had failed to experience *shalom*, the well-being or peace that comes from faithful obedience to God. And the language here is more relational than the language of national restoration. The focus is not on returning to the land and rebuilding the city. The focus is on returning to God, being gathered to Him. Recognizing the relational emphasis explains verse six. It is too small a thing to restore Israel. The need is universal.

I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of
the earth."

This is not simply salvation from Babylon, just bringing Israel back. The need addressed in this song is spiritual and the scope is worldwide. God commissions this servant to restore Israel and the nations to Him. How does the Servant describe Himself in this song? "He has made my mouth a sharp sword... he has also made me a select arrow." The Servant has been selected by God for a specific task. He is God's sword, God's select arrow. And He has been reserved by God, kept hidden to perform this special task, "In the shadow of his hand he has concealed me... he has hidden me in his quiver." That last verset is one of those beautiful Isaiah images that communicates so well. "Hidden in God's quiver" implies both the special reserve with which God has protected the Servant, and the special task He is being reserved to perform. He is a special arrow, hidden in a quiver to be taken out, aimed, and released when God is ready.

The image of a mouth like a sharp sword connects this Servant to the word of God. His word will pierce. His word will be effective. That image could fit a prophet kept in reserve and sent forth to proclaim God's word. But more is going on here. This reference to the word connects back to the first Servant Song where we are told the coastlands wait for the Servant's law or instruction. He Himself has been called, "the Lord's covenant." Here he is called, "Israel." What kind of servant is this? Nothing in the context encourages us to believe Israel is the hidden arrow in the quiver. Israel is not the new thing God is doing. As a servant, Israel has been found considerably wanting. How does blind Israel become a light to the nations? Somehow, this servant embodies and fulfills Covenant. He also embodies and fulfills Israel. He reveals the word of God in a way that is piercing and effective.

How does this Servant fulfill the task of restoration and salvation? Again, His manner is curious. Before, we were told "a bruised reed he would not break." Now we hear the Servant saying,

⁴ But I said, "I have toiled in vain,
Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD,
I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity;
And My reward with My God."

There is an aspect of this Servant's task to restore Israel that will fail. Or at least seem to fail. But He will be vindicated by God, and He will be a light to the nations. We do not want to get ahead of ourselves, but I cannot help thinking about the prologue of John's Gospel. This is John 1,9-12,

⁹ There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. ¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name,

Jesus is the true light. But the world did not know Him, and His own chosen people Israel did not receive Him. Though He came as King, He was rejected as King and crucified. It could be said that He toiled in vain. He spent His strength for nothing. And yet, through His crucifixion He secured salvation for the nations. And through His resurrection He is vindicated by God.

The Lord’s Comment: The task to Israel and the World is Confirmed (49:7-13).

Moving from the second Servant Song, we now get the Lord’s comment on the song, in Isaiah 49:7-13.

<p>⁷ Thus says the LORD, To the despised One, abhorred by the nation, “Kings will see and arise, Because of the LORD who is faithful,</p> <p>⁸ Thus says the LORD, And in a day of salvation I have helped You; And I will keep You and give You for a covenant of the people,</p> <p>⁹ Saying to those who are bound, ‘Go forth,’ Along the roads they will feed, ¹⁰ “They will not hunger or thirst, For He who has compassion on them will lead them ¹¹ “I will make all My mountains a road, ¹² “Behold, these will come from afar;</p> <p>¹³ Shout for joy, O heavens! For the LORD has comforted His people</p>	<p>the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One, To the Servant of rulers, Princes will also bow down, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You.” “In a favorable time I have answered You, To restore the land, to make them inherit the desolate heritages; To those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’ And their pasture will be on all bare heights. Nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down; And will guide them to springs of water. And My highways will be raised up. And lo, these will come from the north and from the west, And these from the land of Sinim.” And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! And will have compassion on His afflicted.</p>
--	---

This is Yahweh, the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel speaking. This familiar awe-inspiring name combination creates an utter contrast with the despised and abhorred Servant. That’s how He is described. Though we quickly see that He is not despised or abhorred by God. God affirms the Servant in His double-task of providing salvation to both Israel and to the nations. There is a simple chiasmic flow in this confirming commentary from God. According to Motyer, we start with a promise of world-wide effectiveness, first among Gentiles then with Israel. After that we see a world-wide gathering, first of Israel, and then of Gentiles. So we have Gentiles – Israel; Israel – Gentiles. The section ends with a song of world-wide joy.

The servants world-wide effectiveness is a surprise. Despised and abhorred by the nation, he somehow becomes a Servant of rulers. That probably means rulers recognize Him as the Servant. Kings see and arise, princes bow down. The Servant’s task may initially seem vain and fruitless. He may have been despised. But as a select arrow, He will not fail to accomplish the task for which God releases Him. He will see success because of the Lord who is faithful, because the Holy One of Israel chose Him.

Moving from verse 7 to verse 8, we shift from success among Gentile king and princes to success with to Israel.

<p>⁸ Thus says the LORD, And I will keep You and give You for a covenant of the people,</p>	<p>“In a favorable time I have answered You, And in a day of salvation I have helped You; To restore the land, to make them inherit the desolate heritages;</p>
--	---

Zion contrasts sharply with the world song over the work of the Servant.⁵⁹ Whereas 49:18 bursts with shouts of joy in the heavens, on earth and from the mountain tops, Zion laments, “I am forsaken, I’m forgotten.”

This response to the Servant Song is troubling; indicative of how Israel will in the future receive the Servant when He does come. Even so, the Lord takes time here to reassure Israel of two things. And these are two things we probably need to be reminding ourselves of personally. The suffering you have to go through does not mean the Lord has forgotten you. And the inclusion of all nations does not mean the Lord has forsaken you. Just because others are special to God, too, that does not mean that you are not special to God in your own unique role. And just because you go through trial and pain, that does not mean that God is not still working on your behalf; that God cares about you.

The underlying truths Israel needs to remember are truths about who God is and what God has promised to do. When suffering comes, when God seems distant, when we are not sure about our own relationship with God, we have to ask, “What do I really believe about God? Do I believe He is good? Do I expect Him to fulfill His promises?” The Lord God reminds Israel that He is not One who will forget His children; He conquers the enemies of His people; and He redeems His own.

The Lord Does Not Forget His Children (14-21)

This is who God is. And He is going to do these things in His time, but He is still going to do them. First, He is the one who does not forget His children. That’s the underlying truth of verses 14-21. In these verses, Isaiah personifies Jerusalem, the city of Zion, as a mother whose inhabitants are her children.

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 14 | But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, | And the Lord has forgotten me.” |
| 15 | “Can a woman forget her nursing child
Even these may forget, | And have no compassion on the son of her womb?
but I will not forget you. |
| 16 | “Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of
My hands; | Your walls are continually before Me. |
| 17 | “Your builders hurry; | Your destroyers and devastators
Will depart from you. |
| 18 | “Lift up your eyes and look around;
As I live,” declares the LORD, | All of them gather together, they come to you.
“You will surely put on all of them as jewels
and bind them on as a bride. |

The city Zion is to lift up her eyes and look around. The people of Israel, her children, even more importantly God’s children, will come back to her. This is the promise, “As I live, declares the Lord, you will surely put on all of them as jewels and bind them on as a bride.” Zion, in a sense, is God’s betrothed, and her children are the wealth she displays as a pride. The image continues, promising not just some children, but an overflowing wealth of children.

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 19 | “For your waste and desolate places
Surely now you will be too cramped for
the inhabitants, | and your destroyed land—
And those who swallowed you will be far away. |
| 20 | “The children of whom you were bereaved
‘The place is too cramped for me; | will yet say in your ears,
Make room for me that I may live here.’ |
| 21 | “Then you will say in your heart,
Since I have been bereaved of my children
and am barren,
And who has reared these? | ‘Who has begotten these for me,
an exile and a wanderer?
Behold, I was left alone;
From where did these come?’ ” |

God asks Zion to look with the eyes of faith past the time of exile; and barrenness; and oppression, to a promised time of abundance. This could be the promise of physical return, but in light of the

⁵⁹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 392.

widows and orphans. They are also described as one day being ashamed of the oaks they desired and the gardens they had chosen. That's a reference to spiritual adultery: sticking up foreign gods in sacred groves. The image of divorce here assumes the reality of spiritual adultery. Israel went her own way and sought out other husbands, other gods. And she did this persistently, this is not a one-time thing. And so God has released her, sent her away to her adulteries. Yet, in spite of Israel's ongoing sin and transgression, God has promised through the Song of the Servant to restore her. God is seeking to restore this wicked, wayward, rebellious Israel. Exile is not proof that God cannot protect Israel. Israel may lament that she has been forsaken and forgotten, but that perspective shows a lack of spiritual awareness. She was forsaken, but only momentarily and because of her own gross sin. God proclaims here that He never forgot her. He is telling Israel this in advance, so they'll know they're not forgotten. "I will restore you. I will make you a fruitful bride."

The problem has nothing to do with whether or not God is able to restore Israel, but whether or not Zion owns up and acknowledges that what happened to her was right and believes God's promise to restore. The language of this text implies indignation regarding Zion's faithless lament. God has just declared, "I am restoring you," and Zion has said, "I am forgotten. I am forsaken." Here, God is saying, "Do you think I cannot save? As I have just declared, I would. Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, I dry up the sea with My rebuke, I make the rivers a wilderness; their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst. I clothe the heavens with blackness and make sackcloth their covering."

Those are an allusion to the plagues in Egypt. If God wants to strike a nation and save His people, God can strike a nation and save His people. Israel is not in exile because God has forgotten or forsaken them, and they're not in exile because Babylon is stronger. God can restore Israel from the exile of her own making. Yes, he can bring them back from Babylon. But can God redeem Israel from the sin of her own heart? Yes, He can do that, too. How? Through a select arrow that He has kept hidden in His quiver. Through a Servant that Israel is going to reject. God will keep His promises to Zion, but He will not limit His promises to Zion. He gives His Servant a double task, saying, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

How will the Servant accomplish these two tasks, to restore Israel and extend God's salvation to the ends of the Earth? More will be revealed in the third Servant Song coming up in our next lesson.

Lesson 32 Isaiah 50:4-52:12 The Third Servant Song

Introduction

When God calls you out of spiritual exile, he calls you on a long journey home. He calls you to walk in the dark by the light of faith, believing that you have been restored to lasting relationship, believing that you are going home. Faith often falters in the dark. Zion cried out, “The Lord has forsaken us. He has forgotten us.” The third Servant Song presents the Servant as a model of faithfulness in dark times. The comments following the song calls us to listen, wake up, and walk with God by the light of faith.

The third Servant Song occurs in 50:4-9. The Lord’s comment on the song comes in just two verses, 50:10-11. It is an exhortation and a warning. The comment regarding Israel takes up quite a bit more text covering 51:1-52:12. There the Lord exhorts Israel to listen, wake up, and walk with God.

The Third Servant Song Isaiah (50:4–9)

We start with the song in Isaiah 50:4-9. In this song, the Servant models obedience and confidence in relationship with God through adverse times. We are never far in these chapters from the motif of the Egyptian Exodus. We know we are looking to future events. At the same time, looking back to the Exodus provides a framework to help us imagine the future. The Servant will be struck, spit on, and humiliated, like a slave of the Egyptian oppression. There is humiliation in Israel’s future. There is also humiliation in the Servant’s future. And yet, He will not be ashamed. God has prepared Him for whatever trial this is. And He has responded with teachability and obedience. After preparing the Servant for a trial, God stands by the Servant in the trial. The Servant perseveres with great confidence in that relationship. The level of confidence, in fact, is surprising. The exile of Israel to Babylon happens because of Israel’s sin and rebellion. But this Servant has full confidence before a court that He will be vindicated. He is not worried at all about someone bringing a case against Him. That level of confidence is surprising in a human servant, in an Israelite who is part of a community that has been exiled for rebellion. How can He be so sure that God is on His side, that the court will find nothing at all to hold against Him?

Let’s read the song, Isaiah 50:4-9.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 4 | The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, | That I may know how to sustain the weary one
with a word. |
| | He awakens Me morning by morning, | He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. |
| 5 | The Lord GOD has opened My ear; | And I was not disobedient
Nor did I turn back. |
| 6 | I gave My back to those who strike Me,
I did not cover My face | And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;
from humiliation and spitting. |
| 7 | For the Lord GOD helps Me,
Therefore, I have set My face like flint, | Therefore, I am not disgraced;
And I know that I will not be ashamed. |
| 8 | He who vindicates Me is near; | Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to
each other; |
| | Who has a case against Me? | Let him draw near to Me. |
| 9 | Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me;
Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; | Who is he who condemns Me?
The moth will eat them. |

The Need Addressed

In our last lesson, we looked at three things in each of the first two songs: What need does the Servant meet? How is the Servant described? And how does the Servant meet the need? Let’s do the same with this third song. We start with the need. And to do that we need to clarify the first verset. My Bible gives this translation, “The Lord God has given me the tongue of disciples.” Tongue of disciples. What does that mean? Looking at some other Bible translations helps. “The Lord has given me... the tongue of those who are taught... the tongue of a teacher... the tongue of the learned... an instructed tongue... a skillful tongue.” That last one, a skillful tongue, is from Robert Alter. He says

the Hebrew is literally, “the disciple’s tongue”, meaning a tongue that has been rigorously trained.⁶⁰ Skipping the second verset for a minute, the next line tells us how the Servant has been rigorously trained in the use of the tongue.

He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.

This Servant rises every morning, or is awakened every morning to listen as a learner, as a disciple of the Lord. That word, “disciple,” in the 4th verset of our couplet is the same Hebrew word for “disciple” in the 1st verset. The ear of the disciple produces the tongue of a disciple. The phrase, “he awakens my ear to listen,” indicates why the Servant is woken up. He is woken up at the start of the day with the purpose of listening to the instruction of God. That phrase, “he awakens my ear to listen,” could also be taken to include a work that God does in the Servant, so that the Servant can hear. The Spirit of God awakens my ear. My ear wakes up. My ear becomes spiritually aware, or sensitive to the instruction of God. That’s a contrast to the audience Isaiah has way back at his calling in chapter 6. Isaiah was told that this people is not going to have an ear to hear. In fact, his preaching the good news to them is going to result in a dullness. Their ears are dull, they are insensitive. They do not hear; keep on listening, but do not perceive. In contrast, this Servant can hear what God has to say because His ear has been awakened.

God awakens the Servant’s ear to listen to instruction as a disciple and one of the things He is instructed in is the skillful use of the tongue. How does the Servant put His skillful tongue to use? That’s the verset I skipped. The Servant tells us, “[My tongue has been trained] that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.”

That’s a clear need. The weary believer needs to be sustained by the words of a skilled disciple of the Lord. The Servant also reveals through His own character and actions how a believer continues in his or her walk with God and becomes a blessing to others as a servant of God. We need words to sustain us. We also need a model, so that we can see how the walk of faith works. And we also need to get to the point where we, who are weary and need sustaining are also the ones who give words of encouragement to sustain others who are weary. We want, also, to have the skilled tongue of a disciple and the receptive ear of the disciple.

There is a sense where the needs of the Servant Songs follow one from the other. The first Song declared the need for justice on the Earth. But justice has this problem. Justice condemns everyone. No human being escapes the penalty of death due for sin and rebellion. How, then, does God gather a people to Himself? Even those willing to come still need to pay the penalty for their sin. That need was addressed in the second Song. Along with justice, the Servant will restore Israel and provide salvation from God’s just wrath to the ends of the Earth. But restoration to relationship with God has this problem. Restoration is not accomplished all at once in the beginning. Glorious Zion is future. Our new bodies are future. We are saved and restored to relationship immediately. But our experience of the perfect Zion is not fully realized until much later. So we live in the already-and-not-yet of a long journey home. We must walk through darkness, not yet experiencing or seeing the promised future reality. We must walk by the light of faith. And we need a model to follow. We need words to sustain us. That’s the need addressed in this third Song.

We also learn in this third Song more about the Servant. And in this song the description of the Servant overlaps with the manner by which He accomplishes His task. So, we can talk about both of them at the same time. His task is to model the life of faith. So the manner by which he does that is the description of the Servant. How does he do it? What characteristics stand out?

The Servant Described

The word, “servant,” is not used in this song to describe the speaker, but it is used in verse 10 by the Lord to describe Him. This Servant’s skillfully uses the Word, and that connects Him to the previous

⁶⁰ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1948.

two Servant Songs. In the first Song, the Servant does not speak as one crying out to be heard in the street: a bruised reed he does not break (42:2-3). In the second Song, his mouth is like a sharp sword (49:2). In this Song, He speaks with a skillful tongue to strengthen the weary.

The Servant's effectiveness in accomplishing His task is always affirmed in the Songs. The second Song, however, introduced a note of struggle, "I have toiled in vain" (49:4). This third Song goes further. Not only will this servant be opposed in the accomplishment of His task. This servant will suffer.

⁶ I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;
I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.

Whatever this suffering is, it sets up the context by which the Servant becomes our model. He is walks through darkness, and pain, and rejection. And he is both receptive to the Word of God, and He is obedient to the Word He receives. Receptivity and obedience are emphasized in verse 5.

⁵ The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient
Nor did I turn back.

The context of suffering shows that He is resilient and persevering in His obedience.

⁷ For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced;
Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed.

It's not only the physical pain of suffering that causes us to give up and turn away from the walk of faith. The psychological side of suffering creates doubt and it saps motivation. This Servant knows what He believes. The opponents who spit on Him and pull out the beard don't just want to hurt Him. They want to humiliate Him. They want Him to believe He has failed. They want Him to think God opposes Him. They want Him to think He is rejected by society. Maybe, to use a modern term, they want Him to believe he is on the wrong side of history. But He does not accept their attempt to shame Him. He has set His face like flint. He is firm in His belief in God despite His own suffering, despite the opposition, despite the attempt to humiliate. He is confident in His future with God.

Motyer uses the adjective, "buoyant."⁶¹ He floats on top of the waters, because of His confidence in who God is and what God has called Him to do. And he makes others buoyant, lifting them up with His example and words.

The Servant's confidence in His mission is linked to His confidence in God and in His confidence that God is on His side. He does not fear wrath from God. He expects vindication by God.

⁸ He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to
each other;
Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me.
⁹ Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me?
Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them.

And you get the confidence. Not only does He say, "Who will contend with me?" He says, "Let us stand up to each other. Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me." It's like saying, "Bring it on! Let's stand face-to-face. You've got something to say about me? Come and say it right in front of me." The servant's confidence in His position with God inspired the Apostle Paul in his confidence in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I'll read Romans 8:31-34 and you'll recognize Isaiah.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? ³³ Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; ³⁴ who is the one who condemns?

⁶¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 393.

Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ we are able to speak the words of the Servant. Jesus is our model. The pulling of the beard, the spitting, the turning His back, this is the suffering that Jesus took on Himself, and the aspect of humiliation is strong. The point of the beating of Jesus and the point of the cross was to humiliate Him. Though, what does Hebrews 12:3 say? "He scorned the cross." He looked ahead to the joy that was before Him. He knew what He was doing. He set his face like flint because He knew His mission and He knew His God. What does it look like to walk through dark times by the light of faith? It looks like this: receptive, obedient, resilient, persevering, buoyant, and confident. He models for us what it looks like to walk with God and to speak words to sustain us as we walk with Him.

That's the third Servant Song. Now comes the Lord's comment on the Song.

The Lord's Comment (50:10-11)

The Lord's comment consists of only two verses, 50:10 and 11. The first verse calls the Israelites to persevere just as the Servant perseveres. When all is dark, walk by the light of faith in God. The second verse warns those who turn from faith to produce their own light to see by. The result is reminiscent of the sorcerers and magicians that lead Babylon before her fall. Babylon was burned up in the false light. Her sorcerers and magicians became the fuel of their own fire.

Each of our two verses contains a triplet, three lines with two versets each. Notice the contrast between the first three lines and the second three lines.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ¹⁰ Who is among you that fears the LORD,
That walks in darkness
Let him trust in the name of the LORD | That obeys the voice of His servant,
and has no light?
and rely on his God. |
| ¹¹ Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
Walk in the light of your fire
This you will have from My hand: | Who encircle yourselves with firebrands,
And among the brands you have set ablaze.
You will lie down in torment. |

The first triplet enjoins us to follow the model of the Servant. Alter sees a connection back to Isaiah 9:2, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light."⁶² That verse followed a contrast set up at the end of chapter 8. Isaiah had exhorted his followers to commit themselves to the Word of God, "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples...to the law and to the testimony!" That was his call. That word for "disciple" in 8:16 is the same Hebrew word used in this Song describing the Servant's tongue and ear. Disciples are exhorted this way in verse 10.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ¹⁰ Who is among you that fears the LORD,
That walks in darkness
Let him trust in the name of the LORD | That obeys the voice of His servant,
and has no light?
and rely on his God. |
|--|---|

Trust in the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord is the nature of God. It's what's true of God. It's the reality of who God is. Trust in that when you don't see. Rely on your God. The word for "light" here is a poetic word, maybe better translated as, "radiance," - "who walks in darkness and has no radiance." You may not have radiant light shining from the tabernacle to guide you. You might not be in the new Zion, where God dwells as a radiant light with His people. But you believe in that radiance. You know He is the light. So, fear Yahweh. Respect Him. Live in awe of Him. Obey the voice of His Servant.

The faithful disciples of Isaiah described back in chapter 8 were set in contrast to the majority of Israel, a people described as "walking in deep darkness." They looked up to curse God for their suffering and looking back down at the Earth to see only distress, darkness, and the gloom of anguish. God speaks to them in verse 11.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ¹¹ Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
Walk in the light of your fire | Who encircle yourselves with firebrands,
And among the brands you have set ablaze. |
|--|---|

⁶² Alter 1949.

This you will have from My hand:

You will lie down in torment.

If you will not respond to the Word of God and His Servant, if you will not fear the Lord of the disciple, if you will not fear the Lord and walk by faith, then light your own fire. Make your own light to see by. It will not end well for you. At the end, you will lie down in torment. You will become fuel for the flames.

Israel and the Song: Zion called to Respond (51:1-52:12)

The section connecting Israel to the Song is much longer than the Lord's comment on the Song. This section takes up 35 verses starting at 51:1. The overall theme of the passage is a call to Israel. The initial oracles exhort Zion to listen. "Open your ears like the servant and listen to what your God has done on your behalf. Then act like the Servant in obedience and faith." These oracles speak to the Israelites positively, assuming a right desire to pursue relationship with God. That's a shift. Though the message is for all Israel, the words apply more to a faithful remnant among the Israelites. It's like we are speaking to a group of disciples.

The ending oracles increase the intensity of the call, shifting from, "Listen!" to, "Wake up!" The tone continues to treat the audience positively. But at the same time, we realize there is a problem. They will be able to walk with God in restored relationship only if they can wake up to what God has done for them.

We will end the passage not being completely sure of what God has done for Israel. He has set them free from bondage. But being set free is not enough. It was not enough in Egypt. Before being set free, the faithful among Israel sacrificed a lamb and spread its blood over the frame of their door. Israel was not excluded from the wrath of God. In that last plague they deserved that, too. But wrath was satisfied by faith through the blood of the lamb. The angel of wrath passed over those houses. They were declared clean.

In the third Servant Song we recognized the Servant's complete confidence in His position with God. "Who will bring a charge against me?" But how can that be true of these Israelites whose forefathers were sent to Babylon for their sin? How can even these who listen, who actually wake from their slumber and depart from captivity with the Lord, how can they be confident God will not burn them up along the way? Because, they're going to sin again. What Passover lamb covers that sin? That question will not be answered here. We have one more Servant Song to go.

The emphasis here is the call for a response to the grace of God. God has set you free. Get up and go. I am not going to take time to go into the details of this passage. It's a long passage. We will move quickly. Recognizing the structure will help us to do that.

Motyer structures this section as a combination of eight oracles. The first three oracles all begin with a call for Israel to listen and a double description of the hearers. Those first three oracles are balanced structurally by the last three oracles. Each of the last three oracles begins with a double imperative like, "Awake, awake," or, "Depart, depart." That leaves two oracles in the middle of the section. The first is a bold command, calling on God to awake. Not just God but "the arm of the Lord." The second provides a message of reassurance.⁶³ I'll read the oracles one by one, making some comments as we go.

Oracle 1: Listen to me – you who pursue righteousness, who seek the Lord.

So, the first three oracles start with a call to listen and double description of the audience. The first is in 51:1-3.

¹ "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, Who seek the LORD:

[That's what I mean by double description, first, "you who pursue righteousness" and second, "who seek the Lord." So they're described twice.]

¹ "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, Who seek the LORD:

⁶³ Motyer 402.

Look to the rock from which you were hewn	And to the quarry from which you were dug.
² “Look to Abraham your father	And to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain;
When he was but one I called him,	Then I blessed him and multiplied him.”
³ Indeed, the LORD will comfort Zion;	He will comfort all her waste places.
And her wilderness He will make like Eden,	And her desert like the garden of the LORD;
Joy and gladness will be found in her,	Thanksgiving and sound of a melody.

The double description is positive. Isaiah speaks to those who seek the Lord and pursue righteousness. He exhorts them to remember the past as a motivation for trusting God in the future. They are to consider their origins. He uses the term, “rock,” which Moses liked to use in terms of God; He is our rock. Isaiah is using it to consider their origins in Abraham and Sarah, examples of believers who trusted in God, even though they experienced much later the fulfillment of God’s promise. And they didn’t even experience the full fulfillment of God’s promise in their lifetime. Just as Abraham and Sarah were comforted, “the Lord will comfort Zion.” Isaiah then reaches further back in time to the garden of Eden as a picture of the salvation that lies in Israel’s future. And the exhortation was, “Listen to this, you who seek the Lord.” Isaiah, by saying these things, is modeling himself after the Servant. The Servant speaks words to the weary to sustain them. Isaiah is speaking words to the weary to sustain them. “Listen to this, you who seek the Lord.”

Oracle 2: Pay attention to me – O my people, O my nation.

The next call to listen comes in 51:4-6. This call also includes a double description of the audience. They are called, “my people,” and, “my nation.”

⁴ “Pay attention to Me, O My people,	And give ear to Me, O My nation;
For a law will go forth from Me,	And I will set My justice for a light of the peoples.
⁵ “My righteousness is near,	My salvation has gone forth,
And My arms will judge the peoples;	
The coastlands will wait for Me,	And for My arm they will wait expectantly.
⁶ “Lift up your eyes to the sky,	Then look to the earth beneath;
For the sky will vanish like smoke,	And the earth will wear out like a garment
And its inhabitants will die in like manner;	
But My salvation will be forever,	And My righteousness will not wane.

Israel is to absorb as true this promise that teaching will go from God to all nations. His justice will be set as a light for peoples. This is not just about the restoration of Israel. This is about salvation granted to all peoples. The beginning of verse 5 and the end of verse 6 create a chiasmic envelope with the four words, righteousness – salvation; salvation - righteousness. The pairing of righteousness and salvation is standard in Isaiah. God’s righteousness is not only about His character, a virtue. It is also about the action that flows from that character. The promise here is that God’s righteous action results not only in just wrath, but also in merciful salvation.

Verse 6 enjoins us to consider all of creation, the sky above, and Earth beneath, possibly taking us further back in time even before Eden, to the very first days. But then we are immediately taken further forward in time to the vanishing of the sky and the wearing out of the Earth. Like smoke vanishes and a garments wear out, the creation is transient. But God’s righteousness and His salvation are forever. Faithful disciples are to remember this as they go through present struggles. Isaiah speaks words to the weary to sustain them, saying, “Pay attention to this, all God’s people.”

Oracle 3: Listen to me – you who know righteousness, a people in whose heart is my law.

The third call to listen comes in verses 7 and 8 with the double description of the audience as, “you who know righteousness,” and, “a people in whose heart is my law.”

⁷ “Listen to Me, you who know righteousness,	A people in whose heart is My law;
Do not fear the reproach of man,	Nor be dismayed at their revilings.
⁸ “For the moth will eat them like a garment,	And the grub will eat them like wool.
But My righteousness will be forever,	And My salvation to all generations.”

The truths of the previous oracle are repeated here with a focus at putting the opposition of men in perspective. Just as the Earth wears out, so also the enemies of God's people wear out. The image is one of garments decaying, but mention of moths and grubs eating the garments invokes human remains decaying in a grave. The moths and grubs will eat them. The enemies of God are transient, "but [His] righteousness will be forever, and [His] salvation to all generations." Poetically, this connects us to the last line of the Servant's Song. This is how He saw those who would contend with Him. "Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them." And so, we are to model ourselves after the Servant. We are to understand the transience human evil and human opposition, and put our trust in God, knowing His righteousness is forever. Isaiah says, "Listen to this, you who know righteousness."

Oracle 4: A call on the arm of the Lord to awake.

That brings us to the central two oracles, the first of which switches the audience around. Instead of God speaking to a faithful remnant of those who pursue Him, this is the faithful remnant calling on the Lord to do what He has promised to do. It sounds similar to a psalm of lament, crying to God for rescue while also trusting in faith that God will, indeed, save. This is verses 9-11.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ⁹ Awake, awake, put on strength,
Awake as in the days of old,
Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces, | O arm of the LORD;
the generations of long ago.
Who pierced the dragon? |
| ¹⁰ Was it not You who dried up the sea,
Who made the depths of the sea a pathway | The waters of the great deep;
For the redeemed to cross over? |
| ¹¹ So the ransomed of the LORD will return
And everlasting joy will be on their heads. | And come with joyful shouting to Zion,
They will obtain gladness and joy,
And sorrow and sighing will flee away. |

Isaiah creates a powerful poetic effect by combining images from Canaanite mythology and the Exodus story. Even though he uses terms from Canaanite mythology, we know he is really referring to the Exodus. We also know that he is using the past Exodus from Egypt to point ahead to a second Exodus from Babylon. So there are some layers here. Rahab and the dragon can refer to the Canaanite myth, but Rahab is also a reference to Egypt, and the dragon works as a reference to Pharaoh. Similarly, "the sea" and "the great deep" work as references to the Canaanite god of death, Yam, and the primordial abyss of chaos, while also referring to the Red Sea: the redeemed cross over. The mythology heightens our sense of the incredible strength of the arm of the Lord as He defeats evil and overcomes chaos. It takes this incredible historical moment of Exodus, of the defeat of the superpower Egypt, and it heightens that to the supernatural struggle where God overcomes chaos.

I realize that someone might still feel uncomfortable with Isaiah's use of mythology to create poetic effect. We know Isaiah does not believe in false gods or pagan myths. He has left no doubt about that with his frequent polemics denying the reality of pagan gods, describing their idol images as mere blocks of wood. We could still question the wisdom of using myth. Should Isaiah use this in his prophecy? Might that lead a reader to be confused regarding the truthfulness of what Isaiah is saying? Does he really believe in Canaanite mythology? But if he does, then does he really believe in the Exodus?

I think that would be a good point if Isaiah regularly interwove cultural myth and ideas into his narrative and into his poetry. But this is a great case of the exception proving the rule. As far as I know, Isaiah only refers to myth this way three times: twice here in 52:9 and 10, and in his reference to Leviathan in 27:1. That's three out of 1300 verses, or 0.2%. On top of that, Isaiah writes in a long tradition of historical narrative, not mythological epic. We know he is not writing myth. Israel has been recording historical narrative for at least 800 years, back to Moses and the Pentateuch. And for Isaiah, he begins Isaiah 1:1 by placing the whole prophecy into its historical context in the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. And then throughout we have references to nations and kings that line up with the historical perspective. This is absolutely not mythological poetry.

¹⁶ “I have put My words in your mouth and have covered you with the shadow of My hand,

We have already noted that a primary task of the Servant is to speak the words of God to God’s people. He will do so with a skillful tongue. And like the arrow hidden in the quiver, He is here covered with the shadow of God’s hand. He is reserved for a special purpose, hidden for the day of revelation. What will this Servant be sent to do?

To establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, ‘You are My people.’ ”

That’s an incredible mandate. Even though God has already stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the Earth, this Servant will establish the heaven anew. He will found the Earth anew. Who does that? Only God does that. How can this be a role of the Servant? How does the Servant establish a new heaven and new Earth and say definitively to Zion, “You are my people.” We can only say we do not know. Is this hyperbole? What is this? As in the earlier Servant Songs, where we are told the Servant is Isaiah, the Servant is the Covenant, the nature of this servant, who often seems very human, also regularly expands to include that which seems beyond human.

Oracle 6: Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself!

The last three oracles amplify the call to God’s people. They need wake up, so they can listen. Each oracle begins with a double imperative. The first oracle is in 17-23.

¹⁷ Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem,
You who have drunk from the LORD’s hand the cup of His anger;
The chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs.
¹⁸ There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne,
Nor is there one to take her by the hand among all the sons she has reared.

Notice the image here is the attempt to arouse a drunken woman. Jerusalem has been made drunk by the wrath of God.

¹⁷ Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem,
You who have drunk from the LORD’s hand the cup of His anger;
The chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs.
¹⁸ There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne,
Nor is there one to take her by the hand among all the sons she has reared.
¹⁹ These two things have befallen you; Who will mourn for you?
The devastation and destruction, famine and sword; How shall I comfort you?
²⁰ Your sons have fainted, they lie helpless at Like an antelope in a net,
the head of every street,
Full of the wrath of the LORD, The rebuke of your God.
²¹ Therefore, please hear this, you afflicted, Who are drunk, but not with wine:
²² Thus says your Lord, the LORD, even your God who contends for His people,
“Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of reeling,
The chalice of My anger;
You will never drink it again. ²³ “I will put it into the hand of your tormentors,
Who have said to you, ‘Lie down that we may You have even made your back like the ground
walk over you.’”

And like the street for those who walk over it.”

Jerusalem has drunk the wrath of God’s hand. She has drunk the full cup. It is a cup of reeling. As the drunken woman totters around, disoriented and purposeless, so also the people of Israel reel from the disorientation caused by defeat, and suffering, and deportation, and exile. Their sons have fainted. They lie on every street. It’s like the whole city is drunken. And there is none to guide her. None to take her by the hand. They all fainted and lie helpless full of God’s wrath and rebuke. But then in verse 22, the Lord takes the cup out of Jerusalem’s hand. The description of the cup is the same as in the first verse of the passage. God has taken from her hand the cup of reeling, the chalice of anger.

¹⁰ The LORD has bared His holy arm
That all the ends of the earth may see
In the sight of all the nations,
The salvation of our God.

Oracle 8: Depart! Depart!

The final oracle is in 52:10-11. It also begins with a double imperative.

¹¹ Depart, depart, go out from there,
This is, "Go out from the City of Man!"

¹¹ Depart, depart, go out from there,
Go out of the midst of her, purify yourselves,
Touch nothing unclean;
You who carry the vessels of the LORD.

¹² But you will not go out in haste,
For the LORD will go before you,
Nor will you go as fugitives;
And the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

Israel has been set free from exile in Babylon. How will they respond to that freedom? Do they sit where they are as though still enslaved? Do they make their home in the City of Man? "Depart, depart, go out from there." Do we do that? We have been spiritually free from exile. Do we still act enslaved? Yes, we live in human culture but do we make our home in the City of Man? "Depart, depart, go out from there." God has ended the period of His wrath and has removed the bondage of the oppressor. The right human response is to get up and go. Not only to get up and go: also to embrace the promise of restoration. Wrath is removed and restoration provided for. And if we are restored to relationship with God, should we not live in that relationship? "Touch nothing unclean." As you go out, "purify yourselves" for you are those "who carry the vessels of the Lord." You are a priesthood.

And when you go out, do not go in haste. You are not sinners trying to escape the wrath of God. You are not prisoners in the dungeon of an oppressor. You have been set free by the hand of God. You do not need to go in haste. You do need to go with faith, determination, and resolve. Let the Lord's Servant be your model. You are not at the end of the journey. You are just beginning. Going out with God will require you to live by the light of faith.

As you walk in faith, be sure of this, "The LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard." God leads and God protects your back. He prepares you for what lies ahead, and He stands with you when it gets hard.

"How lovely are the feet of him who declares good news!" These oracles announce the end of God's wrath, the restoration of God's people, the freedom to journey home with God. The middle oracle called for the arm of the Lord to provide salvation. The Lord will provide it. How does the Lord provide it? How is wrath removed? What is the arm of salvation going to do? How are our sins washed away? How do we live with God as a holy priesthood?

Look to our fourth and final Servant Song that begins, "Behold, my servant..."⁶⁴ We will address the "how" in that song in our next lesson.

⁶⁴ Motyer 402.

- ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul,
By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant,
will justify the many,
He will see [light]⁶⁶ and be satisfied;
As He will bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
Because He poured out Himself to death,
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And He will divide the booty with the strong;
And was numbered with the transgressors;
And interceded for the transgressors.

Who does that Servant sound like to you? This chapter contributes more direct quotes to the New Testament than any other chapter in Isaiah. But before we consider the connection to Jesus Christ, let's do our best to interpret the passage in the original context of Isaiah's message. That will be the whole focus of this lesson: what does this mean here in Isaiah? In our next lesson, we will address Jewish and New Testament interpretations of Isaiah 53.

The Structure of the Fourth Servant Song

This is the fourth and final Servant Song in the Book of the Servant. It is common to refer to this passage as "Isaiah 53" so I might do that, even though the Song really begins with the last three verses of Isaiah 52 and then takes up the whole of Isaiah 53.

The song has a chiasmic structure consisting of five stanzas. The stanzas are not of equal length according to the number of poetic verses or lines, but they are of equal length according to the verse numbering in our Bibles. Each stanza takes up three biblical verses: 52:13-15, 53:1-3; 53:4-6; 53:7-9, and 53:9-12. The first and last stanzas are the most strongly parallel. The last stanza also repeats language from the middle stanza. So in this chiasm, those two stanzas, the middle and the last, most powerfully emphasize how God accomplishes salvation through the Servant.

In both the first and last stanzas God calls the central figure of the song, "My Servant." The first stanza begins with God speaking. Then the song shifts to a narrator. The last stanza begins with the narrator, and then shifts to God speaking. Both stanzas present an enigma. In the first, the Servant is both exalted and disfigured. In last, the Servant is both crushed and made to prosper. The word "many" is important in both stanzas. The Servant will startle or sprinkle many nations in the first. He will justify the many in the last. If the interpretation "sprinkle" is correct in verse 14, then both stanzas present the Servant as an offering.

The inner two stanzas, stanza 2 and 4, provide poetic narrative. Stanza 2 is concerned with the birth and life of the Servant. Stanza 4 is concerned with His judgment, death, and burial. Each stanza describes the Servant with two similes. In stanza 2, He is like a tender shoot and like a root in dry ground. In stanza 4, He is like a lamb led to slaughter and like a sheep led to the shearer.

The middle stanza forms the heart of the song, and really, the heart of the whole Book of the Servant. The Servant takes our sin on Himself. That is the "how" we have been waiting for. How are our crimson hands washed as clean as white snow? How does the burning coal remove sin from Isaiah's lips? How are a sinful and wayward people redeemed? That is what we discover in the song, and it's going to be through the enigma.

That enigma of the first stanza is going to become more understandable by the end, though some mystery still remains. As Isaiah has said before about his prophecies, some things are made known ahead of time so when they happen, we'll say, "God is sovereign! God planned this and He spoke it!" But some things are kept in reserve so that when they happen, we'll marvel and we'll say, "This is new! Who could have imagined this?" Let's go through the song.

⁶⁶ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 399. Oswalt provides this footnote concerning the word "light" in verse 11, "The Masoretic Text lacks 'light,' but the presence of the word in all the Qumran copies [...] and the LXX constitutes strong evidence. Also, the omission in MT may be explained as an error due to the presence of similar consonants in the word 'preceding' [...]" Alter also includes "light." Motyer holds to the MT.

The second Servant Song gave us a similar indication. The Servant's rejection and exaltation will be recognized by human royalty. That was in Isaiah 49:7,

Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its holy one, To the One abhorred by the nation, "Kings will see and arise,	To the despised One, To the Servant of rulers, Princes will also bow down..."
---	---

Future kings will come to understand the enigma. They will see a Servant whose humanity is degraded by His intense suffering and who is also somehow high, lifted up, and greatly exalted. And though some may see, we are also assured this Gospel of the Servant will not be easily received. The next stanza tells us His suffering will be observed and misunderstood. This second stanza is in Isaiah 53:1-3.

B. Suffering observed and misunderstood (1-3)

¹ Who has believed our message?	And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, He has no stately form or majesty	And like a root out of parched ground; That we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
³ He was despised and forsaken of men,	A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

Isaiah is speaking prophecy to Israel about future events. And he says, "Who has believed that message? To whom has the truth about the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The Song is the message. And embedded in the Song's prophecy about the Servant is the Song's prophecy that the Servant will be rejected. He will be seen with human eyes. Those human eyes will fail to discern anything special in Him and fail to understand the purpose of His suffering. The Servant can only be rightly understood when the truth about Him is revealed from God. Ironically, even though the truth about the Servant is revealed in this message of Isaiah's from God, and the truth of the Servant's rejection is revealed in this message of Isaiah from God, the prophecy is not going to prove enough for the human eye and for human reason to overcome human blindness in regard to the Servant. He will be rejected.

That phrase, "arm of the Lord," occurred in the middle of the eight oracles preceding this Song. Isaiah called Israel to wake up and listen. In the midst of that exhortation, Israel boldly turned that exhortation back on God with this request in 51:9.

⁹ Awake, awake, put on strength, Awake as in the days of old,	O arm of the LORD; the generations of long ago.
---	--

The arm, as a member of the body, represents muscular strength. The phrase, "arm of the Lord," in that previous example referred to the mighty power of God. The arm of the Lord is the Lord Himself in action. Here, the Servant is the arm of the Lord. The Servant is somehow God's strength in action. That is what the word from Isaiah reveals. It is not what his contemporaries saw when they beheld Him with human eyes. We are told,

² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,	And like a root out of parched ground;
---	--

As all life begins, He begins as a tender green shoot; fragile, not strong. Not mighty God. His birth is somehow surprising. He will be as a root out of parched, or dry ground. The first simile indicates the fragility of human beginnings, like a tender shoot. The second simile suggests something incongruous about the context from which He springs, like a root out of parched ground. Roots do not normally succeed in growing out of parched ground, and they rarely become fruitful if they grow out of parched ground.

There is more here. The image of a shoot also appears in the Messianic passage that starts in 11:1.

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,	And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
--	--

The Hebrew word for "shoot" is different in these two verses, but the idea is that same. The Hebrew word, "root," is the same word in both places. The root in 11:1 is the Messiah. He will bear fruit. This

root grows out of parched ground. How can such a root bear fruit? His context will not look promising. And He will not look like the expected Messiah. That's the idea in 53:2.

He has no stately form or majesty

No majesty. His appearance is not kingly. Not Messianic. On the contrary,

He has no stately form or majesty

That we should look upon Him, nor appearance
that we should be attracted to Him.

There is nothing about His appearance or His status in life that is going to make us go, "The Messiah! This is Him!" He is not going to be seen. He is going to be rejected.

³ He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

Is He despised and forsaken because He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, or is He a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief because He has been despised and forsaken? Which is cause and which effect? The two go together and build on one another. The next stanza will begin to explain the Servant's suffering. That's not what this stanza does. This stanza makes clear that the Servant comes as a normal man - and is rejected. Acquainted with grief is literally "acquainted with sickness." He is a normal man, familiar with the sickness and sorrow of human life. Maybe more than most. Certainly more than we would expect of a son of David born in a palace.

And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

God says He will prosper. God says He will be high, lifted up, and greatly exalted. Isaiah then laments, "But who has believed our message?" Human evaluation of the Servant will end in rejection. Considering with the physical eye and with the human mind, He is found wanting. Whatever He is attempting, men and women of His generation will not only reject Him; they will turn away from Him. Like a leper or like a sinner, someone full of shame, they will not want to be associated with Him. They will hide their faces. They will shun Him. He will be despised. Isaiah makes it personal. We did not esteem Him. God may have. We did not.

The purpose of His suffering is explained in the third stanza. This is the central heart of the Song, Isaiah 53:4-6.

X Suffering Explained (4-6)

⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted.
⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.
⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused to fall on him the iniquity of us all

The Servant is characterized by sorrows and grief but they are not His own. What can only be known by revelation is stated here. The Servant suffers for us. He takes on Himself our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities. He bore these. He carried them. He was pierced. He was crushed. He was chastened. He was scourged... for us.

The first verset declares, "Surely our griefs he himself bore." That's that Hebrew word that can also be translated as "sickness." It appears in verses 3, 4, and 10. Motyer translates the word as, "the weakness that comes from sickness." Coupled with sorrows in the next verset, he sees it as "all that mars our lives as human beings."⁶⁷

The second line of verse 4a affirms the point from the previous stanza that we have failed to understand the importance of His sufferings.

Again Isaiah includes himself and draws all readers in with the first person plural. We esteemed him stricken. God esteemed Him high, lifted up, greatly exalted. We esteemed him stricken, smitten of

⁶⁷ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 430.

God, afflicted. So we who see with human eyes judge Him as at fault. This is His sickness, His griefs, His sorrows. He deserves this. God has afflicted Him. God has humbled Him. “No,” Isaiah says. This is how God sees it. Verse 5,

⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities;

We are alienated from God because of our own sin. Sin deserves punishment. The word, “pierced,” is only used one other place in Isaiah, in Isaiah 51:9 where the arm of the Lord delivers a death blow to the dragon of chaos. There, the dragon is pierced. Here the Servant is pierced. “Crushed” literally applies to people trampled to death. Here, the Servant is crushed on account of our iniquities.

The second line of verse 5 goes on to describe the piercing and crushing as punishment intended to bring about restoration, but not restoration for the Servant; restoration for us.

The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.

We are the sick ones. We are the ones who need healing. The word translated here as “well-being” is the Hebrew word, “shalom,” or, “peace.” He received in Himself the punishment necessary to make us whole, to bring us into a state of peace. The Servant has become a substitute on our behalf.

Verse 6 clarifies these two truths, the one about us and the one about the Servant. The first truth is about us.

⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way;

This is the truth. We are sick and sorrowful because of our own transgression and iniquities. We have done this. We are like sheep that have wandered away from our master into the valley of the shadow of death, into the jaws of the lion. And the second verset emphasizes that this is not unintentional. It does not just happen to us. Each one of us has willfully turned away from God to go his own way. “I will do what I will do. I will say what I will say. I will think what I will think.” Everyone of us has turned to his own way. We have turned from the goodness of God, from the glory of God. We have turned from our rightful Lord to create our own definition of what is good, and so we have embraced wickedness. Punishment is justly declared over us. That’s the first truth. That’s the truth about us. Here is what’s true about the Servant.

But the LORD has caused to fall on him the iniquity of us all

This is something Yahweh has done. We have sinned against Yahweh. As the One right and true judge, He has declared the just penalty of death. For iniquity to fall on us means that just penalty of iniquity falls on us. But it doesn’t fall on us. It falls on Him.

The fourth stanza clarifies: not only did He bear our sins for us, but He had no sins of his own to bear. His suffering was voluntary and undeserved.

B’ Suffering, voluntary and undeserved (7-9)

⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.

⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom
the stroke was due?

⁹ His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

As the second stanza spoke of the Servant’s birth (“a root out of dry ground”), and His life, (“we esteemed him not”) the fourth stanza speaks of His judgment, His death, and His burial, emphasizing both His willingness to suffer, and that He suffers undeservedly.

Even though He was oppressed and afflicted, He did not open his mouth. Isaiah develops that idea with the image of a sacrificial lamb following meekly behind the one who leads it to slaughter. He

repeats the same idea with the slightly different image of the sheep led to the shearers. In the same way, the Servant allowed Himself to be led. He does not resist.

⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered
Once again the people his generation fail to understand what has happened. They failed to ponder,
failed to even try to arrive at a deeper understanding. They did not consider,

That He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom
the stroke was due?

As if to emphasize the failure of God's people to consider the truth revealed about His Servant, Isaiah shifts from the point of view of the narrator to the point of view of God. They failed to consider that He was cut off out of the land of the living, (that is, He was killed), for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke is due, that stroke being death. His generation did not get that His death was what the people of God, they themselves, deserved. The just punishment for sin is death. God's people still sin. No matter how good they might try to be, they still go their own way; they still sin; they still deserve to be cut off from the land of the living. That is the stroke that is due. That stroke fell on the Servant.

⁹ His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

He will be judged. He will die. And He will be entombed in a grave. But this is to be a sign that He died innocently. He will be with a rich man in His death, whatever that means. It is not clear what it means to be with a rich man in death. It is clear why God will connect Him to a rich man in His death.

Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

He was innocent. He was put to death even though He was innocent. Isaiah confessed when God appeared to him, "I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Isaiah did not argue his own innocence. Isaiah does argue the innocence of the Servant. Like an advocate for the defense, Isaiah proclaims, "He has done no violence. There is no deceit in His mouth. In my mouth, yes. In His mouth, no."

The final stanza restates the enigma of the first stanza, though now we can at least begin to put together the mystery. Exaltation and suffering are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Servant is exalted through sin-bearing suffering.

A' Solution: exaltation through sin-bearing suffering (10-12)

- ¹⁰ But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief;
He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper
In his hand.
- ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see [light]
The Righteous One, My Servant, will justify
the many, As He will bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
Because He poured out Himself to death,
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And He will divide the booty with the strong;
And was numbered with the transgressors;
And interceded for the transgressors.

This final stanza summarizes all the themes of the song. First the enigma; "The Lord was pleased to crush Him." That's a strange way of putting it. "Pleased" does not need to mean the Lord enjoyed the Servant's suffering. He was pleased with the Servant's willingness to offer Himself up for the sake of the Lord's people. He was pleased with the Servant's willingness to render Himself a guilt offering.

In Leviticus 5 and 6, the guilt offering is made in conjunction with the language of restitution, or reparation, or compensation. When one party injures or takes from another party, compensation must be made. The guilt offering is used to make restitution when the sin violates the moral code of

That last verset is also parallel to the first verset, highlighting the enigma. The Lord was pleased to crush Him as a guilt offering. And yet, He is considered a righteous man who will prosper in the Lord's good pleasure. He will be successful.

Verse 11 highlights His success. His suffering and death are purposeful, not symbolic.

¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul, And be satisfied by his knowledge
He will see [light]

That word "light" is debated as to whether it is original or not to the text. It's in different manuscripts. Regardless, the Servant sees something. He will see beyond the anguish of His soul. He sees the outcome of His suffering. He has acted according to His own knowledge and is satisfied with the outcome of His submission to punishment and death. The outcome is stated concretely in the second line of verse 11.

The Righteous One, My Servant, will justify As He will bear their iniquities.
the many,

Again, the servant's own status is defended. He is the righteous one. He does not die for punishment He deserves. He is consider righteous before the divine court. As such, His purposeful death will justify, or make righteous the many. How does His suffering make righteous the many? The next verset explains, "He will bear their iniquities." Defendants before a judge can be justified or declared righteous in one of two ways. They may be found innocent. In that case they are righteous before the court. That is the case of the servant. He is the righteous one, innocent of any wrong doing. A defendant may also be declared righteous by pleading guilty and then fulfilling the punishment applied to him. Once that punishment is competed, he will be declared just before the court. When he pays the fine or serves out his term, he is free to go. Justice is satisfied. He is declared right.

But what if the penalty is death? How can a man still live if he is guilty and the court requires death? The law of God provides a third way. A substitute can bear the punishment on behalf of the defendant. That substitute must be righteous. If not, he must bear the penalty of his own iniquities. But if a righteous man will die, bearing the iniquities of another man, than that other man may be declared righteous before the court. His penalty has been paid. Justice is satisfied. There is a lingering question that goes unanswered here. One righteous man may die for another righteous man. How does this man take the iniquity of us all? We have had indication before that this Servant is more than a man, just a the Messiah presented in the Book of the King must be more than a mere son of David. If He is truly to reign in justice and if His reign is to never end, He must be something more. And He will be called, wonderful Counselor, mighty God, eternal Father, Prince of Peace. So, who is this righteous Servant? First, that He can actually be righteous? There is no sin to account to Him. But second, that He could bear the iniquity not of one man, but of all humanity in His death and yet live to prosper and be exalted? Who is this Servant?

Verse 12 sums up the Servant's exaltation.

¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.

He will be high, lifted up, and greatly exalted, numbered among kings, allotted a portion with the great, and dividing the booty with the strong. Why will He be greatly exalted? Because He humbled Himself to the point of death and took on Himself a death He did not deserve to make it possible for God's people to have the just penalty of their sin satisfied; that the many who are not righteous might justly be declared righteous. For this reason He was greatly exalted,

Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.

Conclusion

How can a holy God dwell with a sinful people? Deliverance from external oppression is not enough. Remove all of our external problems, and we still carry the enemy within. As soon as God got His people out of Egypt, they began to grumble. A good and righteous law did not protect them. The Law condemned them. This was the point made at the end of chapter 48. "If you had paid attention to my commandments, then your well-being [your shalom] would have been like a river and your righteousness like the waves of the sea (48:18)." But they couldn't. And as it is, "'There is no peace [shalom] for the wicked,' says the Lord (48:22)." As it was after Sinai, so it will be after Babylon, and as it was after Babylon, so it will continue to the end of this heaven and Earth. Like wayward sheep, we will all persist in going our own way. We will all bring the righteous wrath of God on ourselves. We need someone who can save us. We need someone who can save us from us.

God has a plan. God has a way. The Servant is the plan. The Servant is the way. He is the righteous substitute for an unrighteous people. He has poured out Himself to death. He has carried the sin of the many. So that God might say, "Do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine."

Lesson 34 Isaiah 53 Interpretations of the Fourth Servant Song

Introduction

Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

I have twice read Isaiah 53 at student meetings without giving any indication of which part of the Bible I was reading. I asked my audience to tell me who wrote the text and who it was about. Except for a handful of participants who knew I was reading from Isaiah 53, everyone else guessed the text came from a New Testament author, most said the Apostle Paul. And almost everyone said the author was speaking about Jesus.

It is very hard, if you have knowledge of the Christian story, not to hear Jesus in Isaiah 53. As a Christian, this is what I hear.

“The servant will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted (52:13).” Jesus was lifted up on a cross, Jesus was lifted up from the grave. Jesus was lifted up into Heaven. He is thrice exalted.

“The servant will be marred in his appearance (52:14).” Jesus was bloodied and bruised.

“Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed (53:1)?” The message of a suffering Messiah was broadly rejected. Jesus’ own followers wanted a victorious king, not a suffering servant.

“He grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground (53:2).” Jesus is the Messianic Son of David on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, the root and shoot of Isaiah 11:1. And He grew up from dry ground, born in a stable and growing up in the backwater of Nazareth.

“He has no stately form or majesty that we should be attracted to Him (53:2).” Jesus was born to poor parents without special outward appearance.

“He was forsaken. Like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him (53:3).” The cross, as an instrument of humiliation, shamed Jesus in the eyes of men and made Him one to be shunned.

“Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted (53:4).” Because of the manner of His death, Jesus was presumed rejected by God. God has stricken Him.

“He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities (53:5).” The word, “pierced,” stands out as a rare word in Isaiah and matches literally Jesus’ death on a cross where Roman soldiers pierced His hands, pierced His feet, and pierced His side with a spear.

“All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way (53:6).” Using “we,” Isaiah describes God’s people Israel as having gone astray. Israel is not the Servant. Jesus’ disciples exemplified this when they scattered at His arrest.

“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, like a lamb that is led to slaughter, yet He did not open His mouth (53:7).” Pilate was surprised at this very thing. Jesus did not argue for His defense. He remained silent and He was led away.

“And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people (53:8).” Peter declared of Jesus’ generation in Jerusalem, “You disowned the Holy and Righteous one and asked for a murderer to be granted to you (Acts 3:14).”

“His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death (53:9).” Jesus should have been buried with the wicked in the grave of a thief, and yet Joseph and Nicodemus were given the right to bury His body, which they did by placing Him in a rich man’s tomb.

“He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth...the righteous one (53:9, 11).” Again this is not Israel. All people sin. Jesus is the Sinless One, the pure and spotless sacrifice.

“He would render himself as a guilt offering (53:10).” John the Baptist proclaimed of Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world.”

“He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in his hand (53:10).” Though Jesus died, he also came back to life. “His offspring” are all who have believed. His days are prolonged for eternity. The good pleasure of the Lord is shown by the vindication of the resurrection and ascension into Heaven.

“By His knowledge he will justify the many (53:11).” No one was justified by the substitute of a goat or lamb. Jesus is the true human substitute who fulfills the legal requirement necessary to justify the many.

“He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many. (53:12)” That is fundamental to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus died to pay the penalty of our sin.

“And interceded for the transgressors (53:12).” He has ascended to the right hand of God, where He intercedes as the one true mediator between God the Father and His people.

For me as a Christian, Isaiah’s prophecy is the clearest of many Old Testament prophecies that give witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is God’s plan for the salvation of the world. Along with the prophecy in Isaiah 7 that a child would be born of a virgin; and in Isaiah 9 that his name would be, “wonderful counselor, mighty God, eternal Father, prince of peace,” we see Isaiah pointing us to something truly new. How can a man be sinless? And how can he die as a substitute - not for one, but for everyone? Just as the true and eternal King must be a man and must be more than a man, the true and sufficient sacrifice must be a man and must be more than a man. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus is sinless, righteous man, and infinite God able to substitute for the many.

That’s my response to Isaiah 53. There are other interpretations. In this lesson I am going to address three categories of interpretation: the Critical Historian’s interpretation, Jewish interpretation, and New Testament interpretations.

We begin with the Critical Historian’s interpretation of Isaiah 53.

The Critical Historian’s interpretation of Isaiah 53.

The Critical Historian’s interpretation is rather easy, especially the early twentieth century position. Isaiah did not write this. Not only is this not the original Isaiah; this is not any Isaiah. This is not a Jew who lived before Jesus. It’s simply way too Christian. Prophecy like this does not happen. Christian scribes obviously came back and adjusted this text once or multiple times after the first century AD.

That’s a hard claim to defend against. How do we prove the veracity of the Old Testament text? How do we know that the words we have here are Isaiah’s words and have not been tampered with or added to through the centuries? At the beginning of the twentieth century, the oldest manuscript of Isaiah dated back only to 900 AD. 900 years after Jesus lived, and 1600 years after Isaiah lived. How can we have any assurance that the text was not corrupted?

The high reverence Jews have for the text of Scripture is one of the reasons we do not have older manuscripts. Damaged or worn out texts were not deemed appropriate for reading on the Sabbath. But those texts were too holy to simply stack in storage or use for some other purpose. So, Jewish communities began to bury these worn out and damaged texts with the same honor and respect as given to a person who has died.

The Jewish practice of burying texts that have deteriorated goes back at least to Rabbi Rava of the 4th century AD. He is quoted in the Talmud, the central commentary of Rabbinic Judaism, as saying, “A Torah scroll that became worn out is interred and buried next to a Torah scholar,”⁶⁸ That practice became a rule in Judaism.

This reverence for the Scripture also positively affected the Jewish method of transcribing a new copy of a manuscript. The primary tradition that provides us with texts of the Old Testament is the Masoretic tradition. The Masoretic manuscripts were transcribed by medieval Jewish scholars active

⁶⁸ <https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.26b.16> (accessed 10/24/2022).

from 600-950 AD.⁶⁹ The Masoretes produced a system of rules for accurate transcription that included, for example, a record of the correct number of words that should exist in every book of the Bible, and what word should be located at the very middle of every book. Every word of every new manuscript was counted and every middle word of every book checked. A wrong count was to result in the rejection of the transcription. So, even though we do not have the original text of Isaiah, we do have a long tradition of linked manuscripts that, at least in theory, should faithfully preserve the text. Still, how do we prove that? In the first half of the 20th century, the oldest manuscript copy of Isaiah was contained in the Aleppo Codex dated 900 AD. How do we prove that no Christian tradition found its way into the transcription of that Hebrew manuscript? How do we prove there were no changes over a 900-year period?

Jewish scholars could make an argument for us by documenting the accuracy of Hebrew transcription through the centuries, and by pointing to a variety of manuscripts in a number of translated languages that do not differ in any significant way in regard to the text of Isaiah.

But the real proof came in 1947, when a Palestinian shepherd boy throwing rocks into a cave discovered ancient texts preserved in clay jars near the Dead Sea. The greatest find was a complete manuscript of Isaiah dated by non-Christian scholars to the second century BC. About 200 years before the birth of Christ and more than 1000 years older than the Aleppo Codex version of Isaiah. The text of that ancient Dead Sea scroll lines up essentially as the medieval Aleppo manuscript - apart from minor, minor differences.

The Critical Historian's argument was proven wrong. Isaiah 53 could not have been influenced by Christian authors, because the Dead Sea Isaiah scroll proves that Isaiah 53 existed at least two hundred years before Jesus lived. As astounding as it may be, the prophetic details regarding Jesus in Isaiah 53 are very real. It simply will not do to presuppose, uncritically, that God cannot foretell what is going to come, and thus automatically deny that Isaiah really did write all of this 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

Now, that's not something Jewish interpreters are going to deny. They do not deny that this is truly Isaiah. But is there another way to interpret this text? So let's turn to possible Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53.

Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53

I am not going to take time to go verse by verse and make a strong Jewish argument for an alternative interpretation of Isaiah 53. And I know that's not fair because at the beginning I went through verse by verse with a Christian view of Isaiah 53. But my goal is not to make a strong Jewish argument. That argument needs to be made by those who are not so biased as I am. I am, admittedly, completely convinced that Isaiah delivers here a prophecy about Jesus. My goal here is not to make the Jewish argument. Rather, my goal is to make Christians aware of the approach some Jewish interpreters have taken. I am not a student of the original Jewish sources so I'm going to get to the original sources through one particular book, *The Gospel According to Isaiah 53: Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish and Christian Theology*, edited by Darrell Bock and Mitch Glaser. I am particularly referencing Michael Brown's chapter titled, *Jewish Interpretations of Isaiah 53*. That is where all my quotes are going to come from.

Brown focuses on two streams of interpretation. The first interprets the servant as the Messiah. The second interprets the servant as Israel.

The Servant is the Messiah

Brown provides nine important references from Jewish sources referring to the servant in Isaiah 53 as the Messiah. The oldest is from Targum Jonathan. A targum is an official translation of the Hebrew

⁶⁹ D. Longacre. "Masoretes" in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.). (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

text into Aramaic, the language Jews of the time understood. So it could be read along with the Hebrew in the synagogue and people understood what was being read. Targum Jonathan dates back to the second century before Christ, so right around the dating of that Dead Sea scroll. Brown writes, "Targum Jonathan interprets Isaiah 53 with reference to the Messiah, but with a fairly radical reworking of the text, emphasizing the Messiah's victory rather than his suffering, and with some application of the text to the nation of Israel as a whole."⁷⁰ That is an interesting example from well before the birth of Christ to a Jewish tendency to downplay any aspect of suffering or death experienced by the Messiah.

Some other examples that interpret the servant in Isaiah as the Messiah include the Midrash Tanchuma, which applies the servant's exaltation in 52:13 and the servant's suffering in 53:3 to the Messiah. The famous Rabbi Maimonides who also served as the personal physician of Saladin interprets the shoot and root reference in Isaiah 53:2 as the Messiah.⁷¹ Brown also provides an often quoted comment from Rabbi Moseh Alshec of the sixteenth century, "[o]ur rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view."⁷²

So, there does exist a solid Jewish voice that predates Jesus and carries through the Middle Ages which interprets the servant in Isaiah 53 as the Messiah, an individual who is the Son of David, but who is not Jesus Christ and who has not yet come. That interpretation, however, is not the predominate modern Jewish interpretation.

The Servant is Israel

Jewish thinkers predominately interpret the servant in Isaiah 53 as the people Israel. Brown traces this interpretation back to the so-called "big three" commentators writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Radak.⁷³

I made reference myself in our previous lesson to an example that supports a corporate view of Isaiah 53. In chapter 1, Isaiah represents the nation of Judah as a man beaten from head to foot. I connected that image to the disfigurement of the servant described in Isaiah 52:14. Isaiah poetically symbolizes corporate groups as individuals. So there's Judah as the beaten man, and there's Babylon as a queen who is humbled, and Zion as a barren wife who has many children. So it's possible that the servant spoken of as a singular person could symbolically represent Israel. It is up to us, the readers, to discern from the context whether Isaiah is speaking of an individual, or whether the individual represents a group.

Sometimes the same reference is used in one context to refer to a corporate group, and in another context to refer to a singular individual. The virgin who will have a son in 7:14 shall name him, Immanuel. That Immanuel is an individual child. But then in the description of Assyria's overflowing Judah in 8:18, Isaiah says its waters will "fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel." That sounds like a reference to corporate Judah as Immanuel. The idea of a servant has been applied in our current context to both corporate Israel the servant, and by implication to the individual, Cyrus. Even the name "Israel," which we would expect to always refer corporately to the people, seems to be applied to an individual in the Second Servant song. "He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel (49:3).'"

That last example may be begging the question: if the ideal servant should always be taken as corporate Israel, then that reference in 49:3 is not an individual servant Israel, but is the corporate servant Israel. But that is the point. Context must guide our understanding of whether Isaiah is using an individual to personify a group, or whether Isaiah is actually speaking about an individual.

⁷⁰ M. L. Brown. "Jewish Interpretations of Isaiah 53" in *The Gospel according to Isaiah 53: Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish And Christian Theology*, D. L. Bock & M. Glaser (Eds.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012) 62.

⁷¹ Brown, 63.

⁷² Brown, 63.

⁷³ Brown, 64.

Ibn Ezra argued that the long text about Israel that comes before the fourth Servant Song, and the response by Israel that comes after the fourth Servant Song both provide a contextual basis for interpreting the servant as corporate Israel. He wrote,

This [passage] is an extremely difficult one. Our opponents say that it refers to their God, supposing the *'servant'* to signify his body: this, however, is not possible, for the body cannot *'understand'* even during a man's lifetime. Moreover, if their view be correct, what will be the meaning of *'seeing [his] seed?'* for he (their God) saw no son; or of *'prolonging days,'* which is equally untrue of him; or of *'dividing the spoil with the strong?'* The proof of its proper meaning lies in the passages immediately before (52:12, where *'you'* signifies Israel), and immediately afterwards (54:1, where *'the barren one'* designates the congregation of Israel); similarly *my servant* means each individual belonging to Israel, and consequently, God's servant, who is in exile [...] Several of these verses, however, have then no meaning [if this is the Messiah], for instance, *'despised and forlorn of men,'* *'taken from prison and judgment,'* *'made his grave with the wicked,'* *'will see seed and prolong days.'* [...] But in my judgment the [passage] is more intimately connected with the context [...] In fact, he is simply speaking of each one of God's servants who is in exile; or, which is more probable, *'my servant'* may mean Israel as a whole, as in 41:8.⁷⁴

This paragraph from Ibn Ezra presents two general arguments. First, context allows us to interpret the servant corporally as Israel. Second, the description of the servant does not match what is known of Jesus. I would argue that context does not allow us to identify Israel with the servant. I agree with Ibn Ezra that Israel is the subject of what comes before and what comes after Isaiah 53. But the servant is set up as a contrast to Israel and as the solution for Israel's sin.

I would also argue that the points at which the passage does not seem to match Jesus are only valid if you reject the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus which, understandably, Ibn Ezra does. Those mysteries belong to what will be new when the arm of the Lord is revealed and not what is made known here through Isaiah. But when those mysteries are accepted, what has been made known by Isaiah all falls logically in place.

Interpreting the servant as Israel creates the problem of how Israel's suffering counted as a substitute for others. Radak provides a creative solution, arguing that Israel does not bear the sin of the Gentiles. That statement in Isaiah 53:4 should be taken as Gentiles mistakenly imagining that Israel bore their sin. Radak explains,

"[I]t is not asserted that Israel actually bore the iniquity of the Gentiles, but the latter only imagine it to be the case when they see, at the time of [their] deliverance, that the faith which Israel adhered to was the true one, while that they themselves had adhered to was the false."⁷⁵

Rashi, on the other hand, has no problem recognizing the text as substitutionary. He wrote,

"But now we see that this came to him not because of his low state, but that he was chastised with pains so that all the nations be atoned for with Israel's suffering. The illness that should rightfully have come upon us, he bore We thought that he was hated by the Omnipresent, but he was not so, but he was pained because of our transgressions and crushed because of our iniquities."⁷⁶

Israel, or the righteous remnant within Israel, somehow suffers pain, persecution, suffering, and death for the sake of others.

This raises the primary tension for Jewish interpreters who do not recognize the servant as the future Messiah, whether Jesus or another to come. Faithful exegesis of the text requires admission that the servant suffers and dies as a substitute for the sin of others. We cannot get around that. And yet, it is

⁷⁴ Brown, 65-66.

⁷⁵ Brown, 69-70.

⁷⁶ Brown, 70.

not clear how Israel's suffering in exile could have accomplished healing, both for Israel and for the nations. We can understand that Jewish believers are not going to allow us to solve some of the challenges in the text by pointing to the incarnation of Jesus. They are not going to believe that God can have appeared in the flesh. And they do not accept the concept of the Trinity. But perhaps common ground, a beginning for discussion can be found in the substitutionary nature of the servant. And perhaps we can argue that atonement for the nations can only be accomplished through the Messiah.

New Testament interpretation

Moving from Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53, let's consider New Testament interpretations. This fourth Servant Song is the most quoted passage by Isaiah in the New Testament. And it is not the case of one verse being quoted many times. Ten quotes of the Song in the New Testament include 9 of the song's 15 verses. The song is quoted in each of the four Gospels, once in Acts, twice in Romans, and three times in 1 Peter. The six authors who wrote these books, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter account for 95% of the New Testament. They all knew this Isaiah 53.

The influence of the Song goes far beyond direct quotes. The language of Isaiah 53 echoes in the Passion narratives in all the Gospels, the justification language in Romans and Galatians, and the fulfillment of sacrifice explained in Hebrews. My goal here is to provide you with a summary of ten direct quotes and a few examples of important allusions.

Matthew 8:17 quoting Isaiah 53:4

I will address the quotations in order of appearance in the New Testament, starting with Matthew. I will spend a little extra time on this first one because it raises an interesting controversy and in doing so provides an important principle for understanding the use of the Old Testament by New Testament authors.

Matthew 8:1-16 records a series of healings performed by Jesus. Jesus heals a leper, the servant of a Roman centurion, Peter's mother, many who are demon possessed, and all who came to Him sick. Matthew sums up these miracles by quoting Isaiah 53:4, "He himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases." That word, "infirmities," can be translated as "griefs," in Isaiah, but is more literally translated as "sickness." Isaiah repeats the word in Isaiah 53:3, 4, and 10.

I remember discussing the implication of that translation with a friend when I was in college. We were walking along the beach in Florida on spring break. He argued that Isaiah's words show that Jesus bore, not only our sin on the cross when He died, but also our sickness. He understood this to mean freedom from sickness is the right of every Christian by faith. If you truly believe that Jesus died for your sickness, you will be healed just the same as if you truly believe that Jesus died for your sin, you will be forgiven. He supported that view with this quote from Matthew 8:17. Matthew says, as a summary of all the healings Jesus performed, that Jesus has taken our infirmity.

There is another way to understand Matthew's point. There is a definite linking between the healings Jesus performs and His taking on Himself all of our sickness. But even when a New Testament author makes a specific quote of an Old Testament text, he expects the reader to consider the whole context of the quote. D. A. Carson makes that point in his commentary on Matthew. He writes, "It is generally understood since the work of C.H. Dodd [...] that when the New Testament quotes a brief Old Testament passage, it often refers implicitly to the entire context of the quotation. This is very likely here for Matthew has a profound understanding of the Old Testament."⁷⁷

And so when we do that, when we go back and study the context of Isaiah 53, we see that the focus is on Jesus bearing our sin on the cross. He is pictured as a guilt offering, a substitute for sin. The focus of the entire Book of the Servant is on the need for national deliverance, and the greater need

⁷⁷ D. A. Carson. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984) 205.

for spiritual deliverance. There is very little focus on healing or deliverance from sickness. Jesus bore all of our sorrows, all of our griefs, all of our sins by substituting Himself as a human servant in the place of human beings weighed down by brokenness. That brokenness, which includes our sickness, is fundamentally the result of human sin. But as we continue on in Isaiah, we are going to see that we have to look ahead to a future time when death and sorrow are completely banished. And as is made clear in the New Testament, that does not happen with the cross. The penalty of sin has been dealt with by the cross. The power of sin no longer has lost its mastery because of the cross. But the presence of sin is still very real. Our bodies continue to decay. Everyone grows old from sickness and disease, no matter how much they believe in the cross. Corruption of this physical world will not end until after the second coming of Jesus Christ and the restoration of a New Heaven and a New Earth, where we will have new bodies.

In Matthew, the healing of Jesus teaches us three things about Jesus. First, He has compassion on us in our brokenness and sorrows. Second, He has power over our brokenness. Third, by healing in the present, He points ahead to full restoration in the future when His kingdom fully comes.

Let's move on to Mark.

Mark 15:28 quoting Isaiah 53:12

The quote from Mark 15:28 is more directly about the crucifixion of Jesus. The previous verse reports, "They crucified two robbers with him, one on His right and one on his left. Then Mark 15:28 quotes Isaiah 53:12, saying, "And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And he was numbered with transgressors.'" This is actually a debatable verse in Mark because it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts. But even if it is not an attestation of a New Testament writer, it is still the attestation of an early Christian scribe who saw Jesus in Isaiah 53 and inserted this note, which at some point was included as part of the text.

Luke 22:37 quoting Isaiah 53:12

Luke's quote in 22:37 is interesting because it is a report of Jesus quoting Isaiah 53:12 about Himself. The quote occurs on the night of Jesus' arrest, just before He takes His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, Jesus will pray, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not My will, but yours be done." And then He will be arrested. Just before that, Jesus applies Isaiah 53:12 to Himself, saying, "For I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, 'And he was numbered with transgressors'; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment."

If Jesus quotes just one verse from Isaiah 53 on the night of His arrest, He also had the whole of Isaiah 53 on His mind. He sees fully the suffering and death Isaiah prophesied when He asks God to remove the cup of suffering. And when He says, "yet not My will, but yours be done," He is communicating His readiness to embrace that suffering and fulfill the role of the Servant, to die as one man for the sins of many.

John 12:38 quoting Isaiah 53:1

John's quote of Isaiah 53 occurs in 12:38, a transitional point of his Gospel. Jesus has completed His public ministry at the end of chapter 11. In chapter 13 Jesus makes final preparations for His disciples at the last supper. In chapter 12, the transition from public ministry to the Passion week, Jesus is anointed by Mary, enters triumphantly into Jerusalem, and announces, "The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified." The chapter ends with a summary of Jesus' public ministry in His own words. But just before that summary, John adds a paragraph explaining why so few Jews had truly believed in Jesus. This is where we get the quote from Isaiah 53:1. It's in John 12:37-38,

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. *This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?"*

John follows that up with a quote from Isaiah vision and calling in chapter 6, where God told Isaiah to expect a lack of reception to his message. Quoting Isaiah 6:10 John writes,

³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ⁴⁰ “He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them (John 12:39-40).”

John then contrasts Isaiah’s faith and the faith of the religious leaders in Jesus’ day.

⁴¹ These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. ⁴² Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God (John 12:41-43).

When John references Isaiah seeing the glory of God, he is speaking about the broader context of Isaiah 6, which he has just quoted. Isaiah saw God’s robe filling the Temple and His glory filling the Earth. This idea of seeing the glory of God is important to John from the beginning. He says in 1:14, “and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John is speaking there about the incarnation of Jesus, using the language of Exodus. Jesus dwelt or tabernacled among us in a way similar to how the glory of God descended upon and shone forth from the tabernacle.

And a study will show us that John’s language in the first 18 verses of the Gospel rely heavily on Genesis and Exodus. We are seeing now in chapter 12 that John’s understanding of the Torah, of the books of Moses are influenced also be the later revelation of the prophets, particularly Isaiah. Seeing God’s glory in Jesus Christ is both an Exodus reference and an Isaiah reference. And that is made clear to us by John’s direct quotes of Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 53. But recognizing that, we now have cause to start wondering about the rest of John’s language that overlaps with Isaiah, language like, see; light; glory; sign. There are words woven through Isaiah and also through John.

That brings me to one more connection in John that I am particularly excited about that occurs right before this passage. Jesus has said, “The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified.” Then he declares in 12:32, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” That’s an important statement in John.

It is the third “lifted up” statement by Jesus that John records. All three communicate what is called, “the irony of John.” To be lifted up is to be exalted. This is language that applies to a king. Caesar is lifted up. Jesus will be lifted up, not in glory, but in shame. And yet, that which is intended to shame Jesus, the cross, will result in the glorious display of His justice and love. God reverses what humans meant for shame and reveals instead the glory and power of His name.

That’s the message of Isaiah 53, the enigma. Irony in John, enigma in Isaiah, it is the same truth with even the same language. You have three times in John, Jesus says He will be lifted up. That verb, “lifted up,” is the same Greek word used in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 52:13, which declares, “Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.”

Radak, one of the famous rabbis of the 12th century I quoted earlier, picked up on the lifted up language. He wrote, concerning Isaiah 53,

I should like to ask the Nazarenes who explain this [passage] of Jesus, how the prophet could have said, ‘He shall be lifted up and lofty exceedingly?’ If this alludes to the flesh, Jesus was not ‘lifted up’ except when he was suspended upon the cross; if it refers to the Godhead, then he was mighty and lifted up from the beginning.⁷⁸

Radak has understood that there is an enigma. And he has rejected the Christian solution for that enigma. John reads Isaiah 52:13 and he understands how the servant will both suffer and be lifted up. Jesus was high, lifted up, greatly exalted. Lifted up on a cross, lifted up from the grave, lifted up into Heaven.

⁷⁸ Brown, (66).

sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

Conclusion

Having summarized all these quotes from New Testament authors, I realize I have set up a distinction that's not fully accurate. The New Testament interpretation of Isaiah 53 is not in contrast to Jewish interpretations. With the exception of Luke, these authors were all sincere Jews. Their understanding of Jesus belongs under the category of Jewish interpretations as another option. We considered two primary Jewish options: first, that the servant is the Messiah who has not yet come; and second, that the servant is Israel. A third Jewish option is represented by the Jewish authors of the New Testament, namely, that the servant of Isaiah 53 is the Messiah and the Messiah is Jesus.

It does make sense for us today to separate the Jewish interpretation from the Christian interpretation. Very early, within the first century, the Christian faith shifted from being a Jewish alternative to become a distinct, primarily non-Jewish faith. But we should never forget that the Christian faith is firmly founded in the Old Testament and in the Jewish hope of a Messiah who will come to reign, and, according to Isaiah, will also come to die.

Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? The problem, according to Isaiah, is not a problem of reason or education. The problem is in the heart. We human beings simply will not see that which we do not want to see. Our eyes are dim and our hearing bad. We have a spiritual problem with God. A disciple is one whose eyes have been opened to see what is right there in front of them, one whose ears have been opened to hear the sweet song of Jesus.

I'll close with John Oswalt's concluding words on Isaiah 53.

Christians look back at this passage from the vantage point of Christ with a piercing sense of recognition, perhaps like that which came to Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch [...]. In almost every word they see the face of their Savior and what had formerly been opaque becomes patently clear. If Isaiah had been compelled to produce a literal description of the life and character of the Servant/Messiah, would it have looked like Jesus of Nazareth? Probably not, but the points of contact between that life and ministry and this text are so many and various that they cannot be coincidental. Either the facts of Jesus' life were reshaped by a conspiracy of early Christian writers to make them conform to this text, a task so complex as to be unimaginable, or, much more simply, his life, death, and resurrection *did* so conform. The text must still be read through the eyes of faith, but with that faith the mystery is no longer about how it is possible for sinful humans to have a healthy and whole relationship with God. The only mystery is how God could love us like that.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 407-408.

Lesson 35 Isaiah 54:1-55:13 Respond to the Servant's Triumph

Introduction

The fourth Servant Song of Isaiah 53 is an incredible prophetic vision of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The two chapters that come after Isaiah 53 – Isaiah 54 and Isaiah 55 – feel just as at home in the New Covenant as Isaiah 53 does. The fourth Servant Song is our climax of the entire Book of the Servant. Even from the beginning of Isaiah we have been asking, “How will God make things right with His sinful people? How does He fulfill the offer in chapter 1 to wash away Judah’s blood stained hands? How does the burning coal of chapter 6 actually cleanse Isaiah’s unclean lips?”

Chapter 40, the beginning of the Book of the Servant, began with God’s heart to comfort His people. We came to understand their need for comfort, which followed the national tragedy of utter defeat and exile to Babylon. God sends messengers to comfort the people with a promise of physical redemption from Babylon back to restoration in Israel. God promises to raise up a servant named Cyrus to set Israel free. That’s the message of comfort. But with that message, Isaiah reveals a dark thread that runs through the whole story. Israel has been sent into exile by God Himself as a response to perpetual, persuasive, unrepentant sin. The darkened heart and rebellious mind of man infects all of God’s people. The critical enemy is not the outer oppressor of Babylon, but the inner oppressor of fallen human nature. That was the tragic message at the end of chapter 48. “If only you had paid attention to my commandments your well-being, [your shalom, your peace], would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea.” But they could not remain true to God’s commands. And so the chapter ended, “There is no peace, [no shalom], for the wicked.” Who are the wicked? Not just Babylon. Look inward, oh people of God! It is you. God sent you into exile out of His just wrath. National redemption has not changed your human nature. You will bring back to Jerusalem the enemy within.

The comfort of physical deliverance is fleeting. Is there any chance for lasting comfort? Any freedom from sin, any hope for peace with our God? Yes! And we were building to that hope through each of the servant songs. In chapter 53 we’ve arrived at the answer. The Suffering Servant takes our place. That’s the “how” of spiritual redemption. We esteemed Him not. But in God’s eyes He is high and lifted up, and greatly exalted. He is pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities. He renders Himself a guilt offering in our place. He justifies the many, bearing the sin of transgressors.

Now, how ought we respond to the sacrifice of the Servant? “Shout for joy O barren one!” “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

That’s the first line of chapter 54 and the first line of chapter 55. These two chapters are God’s comment on the fourth Song. Each Servant Song has been coupled with a comment section that comes after, a comment from God. The comment section of the first two songs confirmed the work of the Servant. The comment section of the last two songs invites a response to the work of the Servant. This climatic fourth Song took up all of chapter 53 with the prophetic promise of New Covenant redemption fulfilled by Jesus Christ, who sacrificed Himself on the cross as a substitute of atonement. The comment that follows is the longest one yet, appropriately extended to two chapters, Isaiah 54 and 55. In this comment section we encounter a two part exhortation to respond to the grace God has provided through the Servant.

As I said in the introduction, this universal invitation for a spiritual response is very much at home in the New Covenant. It will resonate in the heart of every New Covenant believer. In these chapters we are still going to encounter some of the archaic language of poetry, like the image of “enlarging your tent.” No one in Isaiah’s day was enlarging his tent. That language takes us back to the time of Exodus. We will see more language that points back to the Exodus as a symbol of future redemption. We are also going to hear language that sounds like it’s looking forward to the national restoration after the exile in Babylon. It may sound like we are talking about the national physical redemption. But as we have seen previously, we have to take great care in our interpretation of redemption language. As New Covenant believers, we are tempted to interpret the idea of redemption as

spiritual every time we see it, though sometimes it really is referring to the physical rescue of the Jewish people from Babylon. At other times, Isaiah is using very physical language of rescue and return metaphorically to describe spiritual redemption and restoration. And that's these two chapters. Here, the language of national redemption is used in an exhortation for everyone to enter into the blessing of spiritual redemption that has been paid for by the Servant.

The assurance of secure relationship with God that we are going to hear in chapters 54 and 55 follows from the spiritual work accomplished in chapter 53. The covenant of peace is accomplished by the line of David. The love of God results in everlasting joy. We are being invited to a new kind of kingdom made possible by the substitutionary atonement of the Suffering Servant. These two chapters apply as a message of comfort to Isaiah's contemporaries, who must look ahead to the promised victory of the Servant. At the same time, these two chapters apply even more concretely to those of us who now live after the triumph of the Servant. This exhortation is for all of us who are looking back to the amazing love of Jesus Christ as He is lifted high on a cross. How ought we respond to what He has done for us? Shout! Sing! Come! Seek!

Isaiah exhorts us to sing in chapter 54, and to come in chapter 55. Our first chapter is divided into two parts by two controlling metaphors; the barren wife, and the unassailable city. We begin as the barren wife, who the prophet exhorts to "shout for joy" and to "cry aloud" like a woman who has just given birth. This is Isaiah 54:1-10.

Exhortation to sing: The everlasting love of God offers security, peace and righteousness (Isaiah 54)

The Barren Wife Restored and Made Fruitful (54:1-10)

<p>¹ "Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child; For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous</p> <p>² "Enlarge the place of your tent; Lengthen your cords</p> <p>³ "For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">And will resettle the desolate cities.</p> <p>⁴ "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; But you will forget the shame of your youth,</p> <p>⁵ "For your husband is your Maker, And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,</p> <p>⁶ "For like a wife forsaken Even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected,</p> <p>⁷ "For a brief moment I forsook you,</p> <p>⁸ "In an outburst of anger But with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you,"</p> <p>⁹ "For this is like the days of Noah to Me, So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you</p> <p>¹⁰ "For the mountains may be removed But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Says the LORD who has compassion on you.</p>	<p>Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; Than the sons of the married woman," says the LORD.</p> <p>Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; And strengthen your pegs. And your descendants will possess nations</p> <p>And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. Whose name is the LORD of hosts; Who is called the God of all the earth. And grieved in spirit, the LORD has called you. Says your God. But with great compassion I will gather you. I hid My face from you for a moment, Says the LORD your Redeemer.</p> <p>When I swore that the waters of Noah Would not flood the earth again; Nor will I rebuke you. And the hills may shake, And My covenant of peace will not be shaken," Says the LORD who has compassion on you.</p>
--	---

I initially followed Motyer in titling this chapter, "An Invitation To Sing." But "invitation" is not a strong enough word. We are not merely invited. We are exhorted. Isaiah communicates with

imperative after imperative and reason after reason, exerting urgency and positive pressure on us to respond to the great love and compassion of God. He exhorts us to sing because the everlasting love of God offers security, peace, and righteousness.

This metaphor of the barren wife who is restored divides into three parts, each beginning with an imperative followed by supporting claims. The logic of each part is “do... for.” Do this... for this is true. Each part covers a little more text. Part 1 is verse 1, part 2 is verses 2-3, part 3 is verses 4-10. The first part exhorts us to joy over a supernaturally gathered community.

Joy over a supernaturally gathered community. (1)

¹ “Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child; For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous	Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; Than the sons of the married woman,” says the LORD.
---	--

The woman is barren. She can have no children. The phrase, “you have not travailed,” does not mean she has not suffered in life. It means she has never experienced the pain – or the joy - of giving birth.

The story of God giving a barren woman a child occurs several times in the Bible, and beginning with Abraham and Sarah, who could have no children. And yet, God promised them a multitude of descendants. The promise here is to barren Israel, who cannot produce spiritual children. The promise here doesn’t seem to be limited just to Israel as the conception of God’s people. Zion has been mentioned after each of the first three Servant Songs. Significantly, Zion is not mentioned in chapters 54 and 55. The barren woman is not only Israel. The lack of the term, “Zion,” frees us to think of a multinational community; really, of the Church. No human community, no instance of people of God can produce children for God. We are all spiritually barren and impotent. And yet, we are to sing for joy because God will give His people spiritual children. We can’t do it. God can do it.

And that promise is made possible by the work of the Servant. The idea of the many descendants, more numerous than the desolate woman, connects us back to the repetition of the words, “many,” and, “descendants,” in chapter 53. “He will see his offspring (His descendants)... he will justify the many.” Because of the Servant’s work, the barren woman will produce numerous descendants. This is the logic of the verse. “Shout for joy!” That’s the imperative. “Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud!” Why? “For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman.” This is joy over a supernaturally gathered community. The next imperative exhorts us to act in faith on that promise.

Expansion in expectation of growth. (2-3)

² “Enlarge the place of your tent; Lengthen your cords	Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; And strengthen your pegs.
³ “For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,	And your descendants will possess nations
And will resettle the desolate cities.	

Imagining the nomadic journeys of Abraham or of the Israelites in the wilderness, the wife has the responsibility here to enlarge her tent to an extravagant size, “stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not.” Why is she exhorted to lengthen her cords and strengthen the pegs to bear greater tension? What is the “for” that goes with the imperative to enlarge the tents?

“For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. Your descendants will possess nations and will resettle the desolate cities” The language of national restoration is pointing us to a spiritual reality. God’s people will increase. In New Testament terms, this is a promise that God will build His Church. Act in faith with an expectation of growth. You might be barren but spiritual children are still coming!

So we have been exhorted to joy in our hope of what's going to happen. We have been exhorted to expansion to prepare for this growth. Next we are exhorted to personal confidence. The imperative in this third part is followed by several reasons. The initial pattern is in verses 4 and 5.

Confidence in the future. (4-10)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>⁴ "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame;
But you will forget the shame of your youth,</p> | <p>And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced;
And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.</p> |
| <p>⁵ "For your husband is your Maker,
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,</p> | <p>Whose name is the LORD of hosts;
Who is called the God of all the earth.</p> |

The woman has reason for fear and humiliation. The shame of her youth and reproach of her widowhood is felt in the lack of children and the lack of a husband. A barren woman feels not only loss in the ancient Near East. She feels shame. Isaiah does not bring attention to any responsibility the woman has for her shame. A woman can be barren and without husband through no fault of her own; she is still going to feel the shame. We do know from the context that this woman bears responsibility. The Suffering Servant had to die for her sin. That will be made explicit soon. But it is not the initial emphasis.

The emphasis here is not on what the woman did to contribute to her state. The emphasis is on the new status God provides. No more fear. No more humiliation. No more shame. No more reproach. Why? "For your husband is your maker, whose name is the Lord of Hosts. Your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel who is God of all the earth."

By making redeemer parallel to husband in verse 5, Isaiah invites us to think of redeemer as the kinsman-redeemer in Jewish law. That parallel is strengthened by making the woman out to be a widow. She is like Ruth, widowed and without child and as a widow, without hope of a child. Ruth can give Naomi no descendants. You know, there is no hope. And who would even want to marry a poor, widowed foreigner like Ruth? Well, the good and wealthy landowner Boaz, that's who. He accepts his responsibility as kinsman-redeemer to Naomi, and so he marries Ruth and, through Ruth, provides a child; provides descendants to Naomi. That child turned out to be the grandfather of King David, the ancestor of Jesus Christ.

God is kinsman-redeemer like Boaz. He takes the woman, His people, in. He gives her a new status as wife. He gives her security in relationship with Him. He gives her inheritance. He provides children to fill her with joy. Isaiah makes sure we know who does this. Who is this kinsman-redeemer? Your husband is your Maker, Yahweh of hosts, the Holy One of Israel, God of all the Earth. That's who you're depending on for your current status. Be confident, not ashamed! Really, fear and shame have been removed. Isaiah expands on his reasoning, "You have no fear of humiliation for this reason." Verses 6-8.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>⁶ "For like a wife forsaken
Even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected,</p> | <p>And grieved in spirit, the LORD has called you.
Says your God.</p> |
| <p>⁷ "For a brief moment I forsook you,</p> | <p>But with great compassion I will gather you.</p> |
| <p>⁸ "In an outburst of anger
But with everlasting lovingkindness I will have
compassion on you,"</p> | <p>I hid My face from you for a moment,
Says the LORD your Redeemer.</p> |

Now we address that responsibility that the woman, that all of us bear for our own forsaken state. This is true of Israel. It's true of all of humanity. Everyone who would call themselves, "the people of God." We are first forsaken. We have incurred the anger of God. The language reminds me of what Jesus endured. Isaiah says we are like a wife forsaken. We deserve to be forsaken for our many adulteries. Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He did not deserve to be forsaken, but He took our place. Isaiah says, "In an outburst of anger I hid my face from

for this to work. And the only way to step out of the judgement seat is to have someone else step into the judgement seat as a righteous substitute. That's Isaiah 53. Wrath is removed as a possibility for us because we stand to the side in grace, while Jesus takes our place judgement. The covenant of peace is guaranteed by the work of Jesus. That's what Paul says in Romans 5:1-2,

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

Let's sum up this first metaphor of the barren woman. Why are we exhorted to shout for joy? Oswalt puts it this way,

Because the childless, rejected wife is going to be restored to the arms of her loving husband, who promises that nothing can prevent him from loving her, and she will have enough children to fill the earth. Here indeed is cause for praise: abundance for emptiness, honor for shame, and eternal love for lonely despair. This is our God.⁸⁰

Isaiah follows the metaphor of the restored wife with the metaphor of an unassailable city. The barren woman emphasized the personal aspect of secure restoration. Though we know the woman represents the whole people of God, we can each one of us imagine ourselves as the woman, restored from shame to loving relationship. The metaphor of the city maintains an emphasis on our corporal security; our security as people. This is 54:11-17.

The City of God Restored and Made Unassailable (54:11-17)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>¹¹ "O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, Behold, I will set your stones in antimony,
And your foundations I will lay in sapphires.</p> <p>And your gates of crystal,</p> <p>¹³ "All your sons will be taught of the LORD;</p> <p>¹⁴ "In righteousness you will be established;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">And from terror, for it will not come near you.</p> <p>¹⁵ "If anyone fiercely assails you it will not be from Me.</p> <p>¹⁶ "Behold, I Myself have created the smith
And brings out a weapon for its work;</p> <p>¹⁷ "No weapon that is formed against you will prosper;</p> <p>This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,</p> | <p>¹² "Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies,
And your entire wall of precious stones.
And the well-being of your sons will be great.
You will be far from oppression, for you will not fear;</p> <p>Whoever assails you will fall because of you.
who blows the fire of coals
And I have created the destroyer to ruin.
And every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn.
And their vindication is from Me," declares the LORD.</p> |
|---|--|

The image of the barren wife restored emphasizes the loving-kindness of God and a new relationship of peace and security. The image of the city builds on the idea of peace and security and connects us in with the vision of a righteous community.

The first phrase of this section creates an overlapping connection with the previous reference to Noah. The people of God are "afflicted, storm-tossed, not comforted." They are a "ship buffeted by the sea." That insecure, tenuous ship-tossed existence is immediately transformed into the stability of the strong, beautiful, walled, abundant city firmly established on the ground. The city of God is a recurrent theme begun by the description of Zion in chapter 2. Again, we notice the significant lack of reference to Zion here; this city is for everybody.

The description of the city reminds us of the much later vision of John recorded in the book of Revelation: battlements of rubies, gates of crystal, entire wall of precious stones. We get this is more than a city. Just as the numerous descendants of the barren woman must have a spiritual source, so too, the amazing wealth of this city points to something much more than a physical city of man.

⁸⁰ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 415.

Yahweh is present in the city. He will teach the sons of the people Himself. In 13b, the Hebrew word, “shalom,” is repeated, translated in my Bible as, “well-being.” “The well-being of your sons will be great.” At the end of the previous section, God affirmed a covenant of peace with an oath. The covenant of peace promises restoration of relationship in the sense of a removal of hostility. We are no longer enemies. We now have peace with God. Here in 13b, we see the broader meaning of the word, “peace,” that emphasizes the blessing that flows from this secure relationship. Peace is both cessation of hostility, and also wholeness or well-being.

In the metaphor of the barren wife, security in relationship with God is promised. He will never put her away again. Justice has been fully and eternally satisfied. In this metaphor of the city, security from outward enemies is promised. No human foe can breach her walls. Neither can any spiritual enemy. “No weapon formed against you will prosper.” That’s a spiritual promise. “Every tongue that accuses you in judgement you will condemn.” That’s a spiritual reality.

I hear that phrase, “No weapon formed against you will prosper,” and I think of God’s New Covenant promises to protect His people against the forces of evil. Jesus declared in Matthew 16:18,

I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

When we take the whole verse together, I think of the end of Romans 8. Notice the reference to weapon, and condemnation, and vindication in 54,17. “No weapon that is formed against you will prosper.” And, “Every tongue that accuses you in judgement you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their vindication is from Me,” declares the LORD.”

Now listen to Romans 8:34-37.

³⁴ Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ Just as it is written, “FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.” ³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

Who condemns us if our vindication is from God? What weapon can harm us if we cannot be separated from His lovingkindness? We are the bride of Christ. We are the city of God. We sing because the everlasting love of God has provided for us eternal security, peace, and righteousness.

One exhortation, however great it is, is not enough to follow Isaiah 53. Isaiah makes it a double. We are being invited to sing. We are also invited to accept for ourselves the abundance and security made possible by the work of the Servant. Come to God! Seek Him! Depend on His Word! It never fails. That’s Isaiah 55. It also has two divisions in 1-5 and 6-13. We start with Isaiah 55:1-5, an exhortation to come to the Lord’s table.

Exhortation to come: The everlasting word of God provides full, covenanted pardon and complete restoration (Isaiah 55).

Exhortation to Come to the Lord’s Table (55:1-5)

- | | |
|--|---|
| ¹ “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Come, buy wine and milk | And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Without money and without cost. |
| ² “Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, | And your wages for what does not satisfy?
And delight yourself in abundance. |
| ³ “Incline your ear and come to Me.
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, | Listen, that you may live;
According to the faithful mercies shown to David. |
| ⁴ “Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, | A leader and commander for the peoples. |
| ⁵ “Behold, you will call a nation you do not know,
Because of the LORD your God, | And a nation which knows you not will run to you,
even the Holy One of Israel; for He has
glorified you.” |

The invitation to the barren wife highlighted our inability to produce spiritual children. The invitation to the Lord's table highlights our inability to satisfy our needs. We spend whatever resources we have to fill ourselves and nourish ourselves. But nothing we buy is bread. None of it satisfies. Ironically, what we actually need is free and abundant. "Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost... And delight yourself in abundance." God has set the table. He has sent the invitation. Will we respond?

Motyer lays out the internal logic of verses 1-5 as four ideas. These same four ideas will be repeated in the same order in verses 6-13. The content of the two divisions is parallel.⁸¹

(1) The first idea is the invitation to come in verse 1. "Come to the waters." "Come, buy wine and milk." The invitation is stated in terms of grace. You cannot buy for yourself what you need. You can only receive it as a free gift, without cost. Remembering back to 53, we recognize that "free" does not mean "cheap." The lavish spiritual abundance provided at the table of God came at a great cost. The Servant paid the price of humiliation, rejection, painful death, and most significantly He took on Himself the wrath and anger of God against the sin of the entire human race. That's how much this "free gift" cost! It just cost God, not us. He invites us to participate in the abundance of that for which He has already paid.

(2) The second idea is the centrality of the Word of God. This is in verse 2 and the first line of 3. We are exhorted to listen to what God communicates.

- ² "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy?
 Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And delight yourself in abundance.
³ "Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live;

To respond to the offer, we need to hear the offer. Faith needs the Word. The language here is reminiscent of the third Servant Song, "He awakens my ear to listen as a disciple." To truly listen implies not only hearing, but also responding in humble obedience to what we hear.

(3) The third idea is the promise of a New Kingdom for those who respond to the word of God. This promise is in the second line of verse 3 through the first line of verse 5.

- And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David.
⁴ "Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, A leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵ "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you,

The first line speaks to all who hear. The "you" is plural. These are the people of God with whom God makes an everlasting covenant, the covenant of peace promised in 54:10. The invitation to come is an invitation to New Covenant in line with God's faithfulness shown to David. In this context, faithful mercies shown to David are faithful mercies revealed through the chosen son of David, the Messiah.

In verse 4, the Lord changes who He is speaking about; He is speaking about the Messiah in third person. "Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples." The reference to covenant and the reference to David imply kingdom. A covenant is a statement of relationship between King and people. David is the king and His Son will establish an eternal kingdom. God calls Him, that Son of David, a witness to the peoples. He is the witness who makes God known. He is also a leader and commander of peoples. He is not a witness to a people, or a leader of a people. He is a witness to peoples and a leader of peoples. He is a King of kings. A King not over one nation; a King over many nations. This Kingdom is not for Israel alone. So, what has been implied so far by the absence of a specific reference to Zion is now stated clearly. This is not just for Israel. The invitation includes all peoples. God makes this promise directly to the Messiah, switching to second person singular in verse 5, "You will call a nation you do not know, and a nation which knows you not will run to you."

(4) The final idea grounds the New Kingdom reality in God. This is the second line of verse 5.

⁸¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 452.

Because of the LORD your God,

even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you.”

Motyer sums up this first half of chapter 55 by noting the threefold invitation in verse 1 [Come... Come... Come] was followed by a threefold exhortation in 2-3 [to Listen... Incline your ear... Listen] and then concluded in 3-5 with the threefold guarantee of Covenant, King, and Lord.⁸²

Moving to our final passage, we are going to see in the second half of chapter 55 a restatement of these four key ideas that we have just gone over in the first half of chapter 55. This is Isaiah 55:6-13.

Exhortation to seek the Lord (55:6-13)

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 6 | Seek the LORD while He may be found; | Call upon Him while He is near. |
| 7 | Let the wicked forsake his way
And let him return to the LORD, and He will have
compassion on him, | And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. |
| 8 | “For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
declares the LORD. | Nor are your ways My ways,” |
| 9 | “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
And My thoughts than your thoughts. | So are My ways higher than your ways |
| 10 | “For as the rain comes [down upon the earth]
And do not return there
And making it bear and sprout, | and the snow from heaven,
without watering the earth
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to
the eater; |
| 11 | So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
Without accomplishing what I desire, | It will not return to Me empty,
And without succeeding in the matter
for which I sent it. |
| 12 | “For you will go out with joy
The mountains and the hills will break forth
into shouts of joy before you, | And be led forth with peace;
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands. |
| 13 | “Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up,
And it will be a memorial to the LORD, | And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,
For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.” |

That’s good stuff! Let’s go back to it and look at the four ideas that parallel the ideas we already saw in verses 1-5.

(1) The idea of an invitation is restated in verses 6-7.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 6 | Seek the LORD while He may be found; | Call upon Him while He is near. |
| 7 | Let the wicked forsake his way
And let him return to the LORD, and He will have
compassion on him, | And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. |

Our problem is not merely spiritual impotence; that we have no resources in ourselves to meet our spiritual needs. Just as with the barren wife, our problem is now shown to arise from our own sin nature. The invitation is not to the spiritually rich but to the spiritual poor, not to the healthy but to the sick. The invitation is for the wicked. There is a sense of urgency, though. “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” There will come a time when He cannot be found and will not be near. The invitation goes out with the promise that He will have compassion and He will abundantly pardon.

(2) The centrality of the Word of God is restated next in verses 8-11.

- | | | |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| 8 | “For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
declares the LORD. | Nor are your ways My ways,” |
| 9 | “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways | |

⁸² Motyer, 452.

standing with the people of God on Mount Sinai was a sign that all God told Moses when He first called him had, indeed, did come true. Just like a memorial. Likewise, when God finishes the whole story, when He overcomes the curse and forms a New Heaven and a New Earth for His redeemed people, the absence of sin and the beauty of the new creation will stand as an everlasting sign to the glorious grace of God. That's the sign here.

Isaiah wants us to know that what God has accomplished through the Suffering Servant is truly everlasting. He has used that word three times. What the Servant accomplished enables us to enter into the everlasting loving-kindness of God. Our union with Him is based on an everlasting Covenant that will be marked by an everlasting sign. Everlasting loving-kindness, everlasting Covenant, everlasting sign. We are secure in the work of the Servant. And we are secure because He has done the work. We cannot produce spiritual fruit. We cannot meet our needs. But He has. And He has set the table and He invites us to come. Let's end with that invitation.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ¹ “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Come, buy wine and milk | And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Without money and without cost. |
| ² “Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, | And your wages for what does not satisfy?
And delight yourself in abundance. |
| ³ “Incline your ear and come to Me.
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, | Listen, that you may live;
According to the faithful mercies shown to David. |

The Chiastic Structure of Isaiah 55

The structure of Isaiah's poetry often has multiple layers. To experience the effect of this chiastic structure read each parallel section together. Read A¹ in verse 1, then skip to A² in 12-13. Then do the same with B¹ and B². And the same with C¹ and C². Finish with D.

- A¹ The first picture: individual renewal, needs met (1)
- B¹ Hearing the word of the Lord (2–3b)
- C¹ The certainty of the promises (3c–5)
- D The content of the word: a call to repent (6–7)
- C² The seriousness of the call (8–9)
- B² The efficaciousness of the word of the Lord (10–11)
- A² The second picture: world renewal, the curse lifted (12–13)⁸⁴

- | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|
| A¹ | 1 "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Come, buy wine and milk | And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Without money and without cost. |
| B¹ | 2 "Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
3 "Incline your ear and come to Me. | And your wages for what does not satisfy?
And delight yourself in abundance.
Listen, that you may live; |
| C¹ | 4 "Behold, I have made him a <u>witness</u> to the peoples,
5 "Behold, you will <u>call a nation</u> you do not know,
Because of the LORD your God, | According to the faithful mercies shown to David.
A leader and commander for the peoples.
And a nation which knows you not will run to you,
even the Holy One of Israel; for He has
glorified you." |
| D | 6 Seek the LORD while He may be found;
7 Let the wicked forsake his way
And let him return to the LORD, and He will have
compassion on him, | Call upon Him while He is near.
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. |
| A² | 8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
And My thoughts than your thoughts. | Nor are your ways My ways,"
declares the LORD.
So are My ways higher than your ways |
| B² | 10 "For as the rain comes [down upon the earth]
And do not return there
And making it bear and sprout,
11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
Without accomplishing what I desire, | and the snow from heaven,
without watering the earth
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to
the eater;
It will not return to Me empty,
And without succeeding in the matter
for which I sent it. |
| C² | 12 "For you will go out with joy
The mountains and the hills will break forth
into shouts of joy before you,
13 "Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up,
And it will be a memorial to the LORD, | And be led forth with peace;
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,
For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off." |

⁸⁴ Motyer, 452.

Lesson 36 Isaiah 56:1-8 World People, Sabbath People, Praying People

Introduction

And so, we begin the final major section of Isaiah. The Book of the King, Isaiah 1-39, announced that a child would be born. The government of justice and righteousness would rest on His shoulders and there would be no end to His peace. The Book of the Servant, Isaiah 40-55, announced that a servant would die. He would be pierced for our transgressions. He would justify by His death. And he would enable a covenant of peace. The Book of the Anointed Conqueror, chapters 56-66, announces the coming of a third Messianic figure. Just like the root of Jesse in the book of the King and the Servant in the Book of the servant, the Spirit of the Lord will be on this Conqueror whom He has sent:

To bring good news to the afflicted;	... to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives	And freedom to prisoners;
To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD	And the day of vengeance of our God; (61:1b-2a)

The figure of the anointed conqueror sounds very much like the figure of the King and the figure of the Servant. He also sounds very much like the Yahweh Himself, who comes to redeem the nation. Skimming through these chapters, we would be right to ask the question, "What more does Isaiah really need to say? This all sounds very familiar to what has come before in the first 55 chapters of the book. Why did Isaiah keep going?" A cursory overview does reveal a lot of familiar content: a sinful people, a holy God, the plan for Gentiles to stream into Zion. And our last three chapters provided a wonderful climax and resolution with the astonishing revelation in 53 of the Suffering Servant who dies for the sins of God's people, and the heartfelt double exhortation in chapters 54 and 55 for all peoples to come to the waters and drink of the Lord's gracious provision. Why not stop there? We could finish the whole book with the final verses of 55.

- ¹¹ So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter
for which I sent it.
- ¹² "For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace;
The mountains and the hills will break forth And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
into shouts of joy before you,
- ¹³ "Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,
And it will be a memorial to the LORD, For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off."

Amen! Let's end there.

But Isaiah does not want us to end there. Why not? What more did Isaiah want to add after revealing God's promises of both national and spiritual redemption? The trend in the academic world is to see in these last chapters the writings of a later prophet or a later school. Robert Alter's comments on the differences in Isaiah 56-66 support that conclusion. He writes,

The moral exhortation [in Isaiah 56:1], coupled with the urging to observe the Sabbath in the next verse, strikes a new note in the Isaiah collection, one that some commentators have characterized as "sermonic." It is the strong consensus of biblical scholarship, with only a few dissenters, that Isaiah 56-66 is a later composition than Isaiah 40-55, and almost certainly the work of more than one prophet... there are no further prophecies of the people triumphantly crossing the desert to Zion, and the issues engaged are the behavior of the people in their land and the nature of the community they constitute."⁸⁵

I've argued throughout our series that Isaiah is a unitary whole by one author. And I believe that the biggest reason for seeing multiple authors in modern scholarship is the fundamental presupposition that miracles do not happen. Isaiah could not have predicted everything this book claims to predict. It could not have all been written in 700 BC. It must have been written later.

⁸⁵ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1975.

But that is not Alter's point here. His point is about a shift in style and content. These last chapters feel more like a sermon. And the theme of redemption from Babylon is hardly mentioned. I think what Alter misses is the possibility that this third book of Isaiah is a response to the fourth Servant Song and a further development of major themes begun by Isaiah, but not yet finished.

When we see a shift in style and theme, we don't have to immediately assume that we have a new author. Instead, we could easily ask, "How does this increased focus on the experience of the people of God in chapters 56-66 further develop Isaiah's message? Why does it sound more like a sermon now?"

Oswalt makes this point. He says,

"The issue is theological. Something about the theology of chs. 1-55 of Isaiah is not complete... The primary context of these chapters is not a historical one but a theological one. These materials are where they are because they add something to what has already been said; they make some important theological contributions to the corpus. What is that theological contribution?"⁸⁶

Motyer's understanding of the literary structure of the Servant Songs provides interesting insight into why the style of these final chapters has shifted to address the people of Israel more directly. The fourth major division of the Book of the Servant was made up of the second, third, and fourth Servant Songs. The second and third Song were each followed by two comments. The fourth Song was followed by only one comment, though it was a rather long one. For each of the three songs, the first comment was a comment regarding the work of the Servant, either a confirmation of his work, or an invitation to respond to his work. A second, longer comment followed the second and third Servant Songs. That comment focused on Israel's relationship to God. Motyer points out that chapters 56-66 work very well as a development of Israel's relationship with God in light of the fourth Servant Song. The pattern of two comments is kept. The climactic fourth Song occurred in chapter 53. The comment on the servant's work that gave a double invitation was in 54 and 55. Now, the comment considering Israel's relationship to God is provided by the whole final book in chapters 56-66.

I do not know if Motyer is right in seeing chapters 56-66 as a the second comment on the fourth Servant Song. It does fit with the nature of the chapters. It also fits with Oswalt's observation that Isaiah is building theologically on what has come before. We should be asking, "What theological contribution do chapters 56-66 make to the book of Isaiah? Why did we not just stop at 55? What more does Isaiah want us to know?"

We will be considering that question as we study the Book of the Conqueror. This lesson is our introduction to the Book of the Conqueror. We've begun by asking this question, "What additional theological contribution does Isaiah 56-66 make to the whole of Isaiah?" Having raised that important introductory question, let's now consider briefly the structure of the Book of the Conqueror and address its first eight verses.

Structure of the Book of the Conqueror

The Book of the Conqueror is organized chiastically. That's very nice. Commentators will disagree about how well-defined that arrangement is and about whether or not that arrangement is the controlling structure of these chapters. Whether we accept this as a tightly structured chiasm or as a loosely structured one, either way, recognizing the chiasm has helped me personally by providing a simple way to group the material in these chapters. It helps me to, kind of, get my mind around it.

I will give you Oswalt's arrangement, which seems pretty intuitive to me. When you read through these chapters several times, two pairs of passages stand out as providing interesting parallels. I encourage you to look at these two pairs on your own. They really do help structure the whole. The first pair of passages occur at the beginning and end of the Book of the Conqueror. 56:1-8 and 66:18-

⁸⁶ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 452.

- ³ Let not the foreigner say who has joined himself to the LORD,
“The LORD will surely separate me from His people.” Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”
- ⁴ For thus says the LORD, “To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant,
- ⁵ To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial and a name better than that of sons
and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.
- ⁶ “Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, To minister to Him and to love the name of the LORD,
To be His servants,
every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant;
- ⁷ Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar;
For My house a house of prayer will be called for all the peoples.”
- ⁸ The Lord GOD declares who gathers the dispersed of Israel,
“Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered.”

Introduction to the Book of the Conqueror (1-2)

The Book of the Conqueror begins with this vision of a world people characterized as a Sabbath people, a praying people. Inclusion of marginalized eunuchs and non-Jews flows right out of the worldwide invitations of chapters 54 and 55. The whole of Isaiah prepares us to expect a world people. We get here both a positive depiction of the kind of person who is close to the heart of God, and at the same time a rebuke of anyone who presumes closeness to God based on ethnicity, empty ritual, or past institutions. These eunuchs and foreigners show close relationship to Yahweh. And Yahweh shows His full acceptance to them.

Before we address the verses focused on the kind of people acknowledged to be in secure relationship with God, we need to address the first two verses. These two verses introduce the entire Book of the Conqueror.

- ¹ Thus says the LORD,
“Preserve justice and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come
And My righteousness to be revealed.
- ² “How blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who takes hold of it;

What comes to mind when you hear God say, “My salvation is about to come and my righteousness to be revealed?” Is that a good thing or a bad thing? You know, it really depends on whether or not you are God’s friend or God’s foe.

God’s salvation is an act of power. Isaiah regularly links God’s salvation to God’s righteousness. That was a theme we considered in chapter 45. Since salvation is an act of power, the parallel phrase, “My righteousness to be revealed” also indicates a display of power. At this moment Isaiah is not talking about who God is; you know, holy and righteous; His character. He is talking about what God does. God’s salvation is about to come, His righteousness to be revealed in a time and place. God’s righteousness and salvation can speak about His rescue of Israel from Babylon. That will be good news for the Jews and bad news for the Babylonians. Salvation is only good news for those rescued. Righteousness will be revealed through the crushing of God’s enemy. Salvation and righteousness can also speak of humanity’s rescue from sin. God’s righteousness is revealed through the death of His Son on the cross by which we are saved. Salvation and righteousness also look ahead to the second coming of Jesus and the defeat of all God’s enemies. We will have to see how Isaiah develops the revelation of God’s righteousness in the following chapters.

Isaiah does not just mention God’s righteousness in this first verse. He first mentions human righteousness. As with God, his focus here is not on our righteous character: it is on righteous action, “Preserve justice and do righteousness.” Who is Isaiah speaking to? Who is supposed to preserve justice and do righteousness?” That’s one question. A second question wonders about the logical

and these foreigners!” The section is connected to verses 1 and 2 by showing the kind of man the Lord desires to bless. And it’s just really interesting the kind of man is a eunuch, or a foreigner. It’s like Jesus telling the Good Samaritan story. We are surprised that it’s the Good Samaritan the one who shows us the kind of man who delights the Lord’s heart. But we’re going to see, it is not the ethnic Jew who delights God. It is the one who “preserves justice, does righteousness, keeps from profaning the Sabbath and from doing evil.”

The basic principle is stated in verse 3.

³ Let not the foreigner say _____ who has joined himself to the LORD,
“The LORD will surely separate me from His people.” Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”

Isaiah’s use of, “foreigner,” and, “eunuch,” echo Deuteronomy 23, but in a way that seems to overturn the Law of Moses. Deuteronomy 23:1-3 say this,

No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD. [...] No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their *descendants*, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:1 and 3).

At the surface, Isaiah seems to be contradicting Moses. I doubt that is the case. Issues of the Law often create tensions that we have to work out with wisdom. It is more likely that Isaiah is expanding our understanding of Moses in a way similar to what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount. The passage in Deuteronomy establishes principles of exclusion. In regard to eunuchs, the focus is most likely on ritual mutilation of the body connected to pagan worship practices. In regard to the Ammonite and Moabites, the focus is on the historical efforts to destroy Israel and pervert her worship of Yahweh. These exclusions are intended to maintain right relationship to God and the revealed truth of His Covenant. As harsh as these principles of exclusion are communicated, they did not prevent God from including into His family Ruth the Moabitess, an incredibly positive example of faith, who gives birth to the line of King David.

Isaiah’s focus in his passage is on inclusion rather than exclusion, though we need to see that Isaiah does maintain boundaries on inclusion. The foreigner and eunuch are not included on their own terms. They are not invited to bring their own religious beliefs and practices into the assembly. They are not invited to bring their own moral code into the assembly. They are not even invited to bring their own sense of identity into the community. They are included because they humbly submit to God’s revelation of Himself, to God’s code of ethics, and to God’s definition of who they are.

Eunuchs are included (4-5)

First the eunuchs:

⁴ For thus says the LORD, _____ “To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,
And choose what pleases Me, _____ And hold fast My covenant,
⁵ To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial and a name better than that of sons
and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.

The eunuch is included! Isaiah does not tell us whether this is a person born without genitalia or a person whose genitalia has been mutilated. The note of inclusion suggests that we are not supposed to make a distinction. Any eunuch can come. Now, something that occurred to me is, I don’t know any eunuchs. And I’m guessing that you don’t know any eunuchs.

For the last several centuries in Western culture Isaiah’s openness to eunuchs has been an abstract form of inclusion. It makes the point that someone abnormal, on the edge of society, can be included, but hardly anybody knows a eunuch. But this passage is taking on concrete relevance in the modern West. We could just slightly rephrase the term, “eunuch,” to, “transgender.” That might give us a similar uncomfortable feeling that Isaiah expects to create in his Jewish audience when he said eunuchs are welcome. He could have easily said, “Transgender people are welcome.”

So, we can modernize the challenge by asking, “Can a person struggling with gender dysphoria be welcomed into relationship with God? Can a person who has actually gone through transgender surgery be welcomed into relationship with God?” Isaiah says, “Yes, absolutely, yes. They can be a model of the kind of person that pleases God.”

Is a transgender person welcomed on their own terms? Well now, to that Isaiah would say, “No, absolutely, no.” None of us can come on our own terms. Demanding to come to God with your own definition of God, your own definition of morality, and your own definition of self is the opposite of coming to God. Entering a church is not coming to God. Engaging in religious community and ritual is not coming to God.

Genuine faith is giving of oneself into the hands of God. It is a humble obedience. It is a bowing of the knee to the King. It is an acceptance of God as the One who reveals and defines. God reveals His nature to us. God reveals what is just and loving, to us. God defines who we are as human beings. Coming to God on our own terms is not coming to God.

Will the person struggling with gender dysphoria experience immediate freedom from anxiety and confusion when they come to God? Most likely not, no. Coming to terms with who we are from the eyes of God is often a long and painful process. The person who has gone through transgender surgery will need to repent of their attempt at self-definition. They will be challenged by God’s Word to a new understanding of what it means to be human; what it means to be man or to be woman; what it means to be created in God’s image.

Isaiah highlights this humble obedience in relationship to God as requirement for inclusion, or maybe has a mark of inclusion. It is not all eunuchs who are included. “It is those who keep my Sabbaths, choose what pleases me, hold fast my Covenant.” There is a desire to know and obey God within the Covenant context that God has defined.

Covenant blessing follows Covenant obedience. Eunuchs who enter into this kind of Covenant relationship will receive in the house of God “a name better than that of sons and daughters.” It is better because it is everlasting. And it is true. They will “not be cut off.” That is an intentionally play on words. The eunuch may have cut off his genitalia, but if he repents and seeks God in humble faith, he will be included. And once included, he will not be cut off. He will receive a new name, a new understanding of self-identity that comes from his Creator. He will come to know his true self.

Foreigners are included (6-8)

The Covenant of God is open beyond the extremely marginalized eunuch to also include people of all ethnicities. All foreigners are welcome. Just as with the eunuch, they are welcome on the condition that they yield in faithful, obedient, loving relationship to Yahweh. Verse 6.

⁶ “Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
To minister to Him and to love the name of the LORD,
To be His servants,
every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant;

Isaiah piles up five traits to describe the foreigners who will experience the Covenant blessing of the Lord. If they join themselves to Lord in the way characterized by these five traits or behaviors, they will be fully recognized as God’s own people. The foreigner is welcome who ministers to the Lord. That is a surprising word to use for a foreigner. “Minister” in this context implies the Temple service of Jewish priests. Instead of the word, “minister,” we could say, “the foreigner is welcome who comes to serve God as an act of worship”. Second, the foreigner is welcome if he loves the name of the Lord. He does not bring in his own definition of the gods and apply it to Yahweh. He loves the name that God Himself has revealed. And this is a mark of faith. When your eyes have been opened, you will love who God is. Third, the foreigner is welcome if he comes as a servant. That implies a heart of willful obedience. Fourth, the foreigner is welcome if he keeps from profaning the Sabbath. That’s an odd, life-changing reality for a non-Jew. Who stops work on the last day of the week? Much more, who allows their own workers and slaves and animals a day of rest? This is a very Jewish practice. As with the eunuch, not profaning the Sabbath is not simply keeping the ritual command

not to work, but it includes the willingness to let God define our very schedule, and to focus on genuine relationship with Him. Finally, the foreigner is welcome who holds fast the Covenant of God. God defines what is good. God sets the agenda.

God's promised blessing on foreigners who are like this, who have this kind of heart for God, is communicated in verses 7 and 8.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>⁷ Even those I will bring to My holy mountain
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
For My house a house of prayer</p> | <p>And make them joyful in My house of prayer.
will be acceptable on My altar;
will be called for all the peoples.”</p> |
| <p>⁸ The Lord GOD declares
“Yet others I will gather to them,</p> | <p>who gathers the dispersed of Israel,
to those already gathered.”</p> |

Jesus quoted this vision, when He cleared the money changers out of the court of the Gentiles, proclaimed in Matthew 21:13, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den.” Jesus also agreed with the idea in verse 8 that God’s plan has always been to gather in non-Jews together with Jews, saying in John 10:16, “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them in also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.” Isaiah’s does not envision foreigners who merely adopt Jewish ritual. The foreigners who come will be joyful in God’s house of prayer. Everyone who has grown in up in church, synagogue, or mosque knows how tedious and not joyful prayer can be. What has to happen that prayer becomes joyful? Isaiah envisions heart relationship between these foreigners and their God.

Concluding this passage, we might ask along with Paul, “What then of the Jews?” This prophetic description of the accepted foreigner and eunuch is not meant to create a separate expectation for non-Jews. This is also the expectation for Jews. There is a rebuke here for the Jew who believes he is made acceptable by his ethnicity or by his ritual. And it is not just a rebuke for the Jew. It is a rebuke of any of us today who calls ourselves, Christian, based on ethnicity, or based on family participation in a church, or based on maintenance of certain rituals and being part of a certain institution. None of that makes you a Christian.

A heart of humble obedience, loving the name of God, receiving your name from God, this is what shows you to be in right relationship with the Lord. In the same way that this text stands as a heart-check for the Jews, it stands as a heart-check for every Christian. Is this who I am? Am I one who has joined himself to the Lord, who loves the name of the Lord, who seeks to minister to the Lord and live as His servant? Do I uphold the Sabbath and keep the Covenant? Do I pursue justice and do what is right? Is my life marked by humble obedience? That’s the challenge Isaiah serves up here at the beginning of the book of the Conqueror. He will develop this challenge in the following chapters.

Lesson 37 Isaiah 56:9-57:21 Two Parties – Problem and Solution

Introduction

Isaiah <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>		
Book of the Anointed Conqueror 56-66		
The Ideal and the Actual: The Needs and the Sins of the Lord's People 56:1-59:13	The Coming of the Anointed Conqueror 59:14-63:6	Prayer and Response: Steps to the New Heaven and New Earth 63:7-66:24

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

We have begun the third major section of Isaiah, the Book of the Conqueror. In our last lesson, I gave a brief overview of the chiasmic structure of this major section. There are two outstanding parallel pairs of passages. Those are the inclusion of Gentiles at the beginning and end of the book, and the description of God as Divine Warrior at the end of chapter 59 and the beginning of chapter 63. These two parallel pairs suggest a more complex chiasmic structure, but we are going to keep it simple, following Motyer's three part structure of beginning, end, and middle.

Motyer's titles are a little lengthy. He calls the beginning section, "The Ideal and the Actual: the Needs and the Sins of the Lord's People." That will be 56:1-59:13. That's the section we are in right now. The middle section has a direct title, "The coming of the Anointed Conqueror." That section is the one that begins and ends with the Divine Warrior passages. It's our middle. It goes from 59:14-63:6. Motyer's ending section is titled, "Prayer and Response: Steps to the New Heaven and New Earth." That's going to come in 63:7-66:24.

Isaiah <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>		
Book of the Anointed Conqueror 56-66		
The Ideal and the Actual: The Needs and the Sins of the Lord's People 56:1-59:13		
World People, Sabbath People, Praying People 56:1-8	Two Parties: Problem and Solution 56:9-57:21	Sin Exposed and Confessed 58:1-59:13

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

So that's our top level structure of the Book of the Conqueror. With our last lesson, we have just started the beginning section, "The Ideal and the Actual: the Needs and the Sins of the Lord's People." And we have all experienced the ideal and the actual. Jesus Christ models for us as Christians the ideal of human obedience and love. We live in the actual reality that falls far short of that ideal. That's the gap in the experience of a believer. Isaiah is speaking to a much wider gap between the ideal and the actual present in God's people of Judah. So, that's not just a gap for believers: that's a gap between the non-believing of Judah and the believing of Judah. It's the kind of gap that appears in so-called Christian nation or, over time, in a church or in a denomination that may have started off quite well, but has strayed from relationship with God and commitment to His Word, and so you find this large group of people claiming to be Christians but really, there is only a remnant within the large group that is truly believing and following God according to His Word.

Isaiah described an ideal of covenant faithfulness to us in the introductory section that we covered in our last lesson. How ought God's people live? Well, "Preserve justice and do righteousness." Isaiah developed that covenant faithfulness with the unexpected models of the eunuch and the foreigner. What is God's ideal for His people? It does not have to do with past religious behavior, physical mutilation, ethnicity. It has to do with choosing what pleases the Lord; joining yourself to Him; ministering to Him; loving His name; keeping from profaning the Sabbath; holding fast to His

the Book of the Servant as always meaning, “redemption from sin.” Whereas the Jews who had already seen the Northern Kingdom exiled to foreign lands, would better understand that redemption can mean, “national deliverance from foreign oppression.” We have to understand the original meaning each time the word, “redemption,” is used according to the primary audience. Then we can apply that meaning to our New Covenant context.

The question of primary audience is a bit complicated in Isaiah because the literary audience is varied throughout the text. And I am using that phrase, “literary audience,” to define the person or persons spoken to in a particular passage. For example, when Isaiah addresses King Ahaz directly, his words are meant for Ahaz. Ahaz is the literary audience. But the whole story about Ahaz is included into the book of Isaiah not for Ahaz but for who? Who is the audience that receives the completed work of Isaiah? And why did Isaiah want them to know about Ahaz? What was he communicating to them through the story of Ahaz?

Ahaz is not the only literary audience in the book. The Book of the King has addresses to Ahaz, to his son Hezekiah, to the Northern Kingdom Israel, to the Southern Kingdom Judah, to the disciples of Isaiah, and to a plethora of Gentile nations, such as Edom, Moab, Philistia, Assyria, and Egypt. These audiences are all directly addressed in the Book of the King. They are the literary audiences in the work.

Moving into the book of the Servant, God’s call to comfort His people looks ahead to future audiences that have not yet been born. Isaiah speaks to the generation that will experience the Babylonian exile; further ahead to the generation that will experience national redemption and return to Israel; and even further ahead to the people who will fail to esteem the Servant of God who gives his life for them. Just as the generation of Ahaz is not the primary audience, so also the future generations of exile, return, and deliverance are not the primary audience of Isaiah.

We noticed in our last lesson that one of the features of the Book of the Conqueror is how sermonically the passages seem to be, especially in the first chapters. Isaiah seems to be speaking directly to his primary audience. He has written about the past and the future in order to communicate directly to his present generation. This is not the first time he has done this. He has spoken directly to the people of Judah throughout. Though, having come to the end, I think we can be more confident that he is now talking directly to the present generation.

And which generation is that? Who is the “you” of chapters 56-59? Our first indication came in the very first verse of Isaiah which characterizes the book as, “The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, concerning Judah and Jerusalem which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah.” So, he has brought together the visions, the prophecies of his ministry through these four kings into a final master work. The primary audience is not living in the days of Uzziah, or Jotham, or Ahaz but in the days of the final king, Hezekiah. This is when the book of Isaiah gets produced in its end form that we have it in. And judging from the narrative about Hezekiah at the end of the Book of the King, I assume that we are now in the later years of his reign. That’s Isaiah’s primary audience. This is the generation that received the completed work of Isaiah. The people to whom he wrote were the people of Judah who were living at the end of Hezekiah’s reign.

And though the next king Manasseh is not figured into that first verse of the book, I think we need to recognize him as an important presence in this time period. As often happened with Jewish kings, Manasseh co-reigned with his father Hezekiah for 10 years until his father’s death. The description of the people of Judah that we are about to encounter in this lesson fits well with the description of Manasseh’s reign. In fact, the terrible swing from Hezekiah’s faithfulness to Manasseh’s apostasy makes more sense if the leadership and people were already headed into that direction under which Manasseh would openly lead them.

Manasseh was only 12 years old when he became king with his father in 696 BC. So in that beginning he wasn’t really reigning. Perhaps he was declared king early because of Hezekiah’s awareness that his time on earth was limited. We read about that in chapter 39, that Hezekiah had this near-death

experience through sickness and then he was promised an additional 15 years, and so maybe he has drawn his son into co-reign with him because of awareness of his coming death. So this is a time for Manasseh to be prepared to take over. We can only guess at Manasseh's influence over the next 10 years. I don't think we can discern how much Manasseh influenced the culture around him versus how much he was influenced by that culture. By the time he took over the rule of Judah at 22 years of age, he had completely rejected the faith of his father. Here is an account of his reign from 2 Kings 21:1-16 that also gives us a sense of this generation that Isaiah is writing to.

² [Manasseh] did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel. ³ For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. ⁴ He built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put My name." ⁵ For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. ⁶ He made his son pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD provoking *Him to anger*. ⁷ Then he set the carved image of Asherah that he had made, in the house of which the LORD said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever. ⁸ And I will not make the feet of Israel wander anymore from the land which I gave their fathers, if only they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that My servant Moses commanded them." ⁹ But they did not listen, and Manasseh seduced them to do evil more than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the sons of Israel...¹⁶ Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another;

That's where this generation is headed. As we will see in the following text, they may have already been there with only the faithfulness of Hezekiah holding back the full embrace of idolatry at the top. Judging this generation as the primary audience of Isaiah's master work, we recognize that he is writing a rebuke that is also a warning, an offer, and an invitation. Isaiah exemplifies the role of the lawsuit prophet. He is not mediating a new covenant. He is calling the people back to the existing covenant. He is warning them of the danger inherent in their covenant rebellion against God and paints a picture of the covenant blessing available to those who will walk with God.

This is where you are and this is where you are headed. Wake up. Return to the Lord. Receive His grace. Live for Him. Judah falls far short of the ideal communicated in 56:1-8. Isaiah is now describing the actual state of Judah in our present passage of Isaiah 56:9-57:21. We have generally identified our audience as the generation of Judah living at the end of King Hezekiah's reign. This passage is going to give us more insight into that generation. Motyer calls this subsection, "Two Parties: Problem and Solution." As we read through, we can expect to see two distinct groups or parties. Isaiah starts with a description of Judah's leadership, and then moves on to a description of Judah's people. Those are not the two parties. This is not the distinction between leadership and people. The two parties exist among the leadership, and the two parties exist among the people. We begin with the failure of leadership in 56:9-12.

The Failure of Leadership (56:9-12)

⁹ All you beasts of the field, Come to eat.	All you beasts in the forest,
¹⁰ His watchmen are blind, All of them are mute dogs Dreamers lying down,	All of them know nothing. unable to bark, who love to slumber;
¹¹ And the dogs are greedy, And they are shepherds They have all turned to their own way,	they are not satisfied. who have no understanding; Each one to his unjust gain, to the last one.
¹² "Come," they say, "let us get wine, And tomorrow will be like today,	and let us drink heavily of strong drink; only more so."

Imagine a village or town with open gates and no watchmen. No one sees the danger. No one is able to raise an alarm. This passage begins with an invitation to predatory forces.

⁹ All you beasts of the field, Come to eat. All you beasts in the forest,

Judah is vulnerable to human or spiritual aggression, because her leaders lack discernment. They are not able to respond to the dangers threatening their society. They do not see the danger.

¹⁰ His watchmen are blind, All of them know nothing.

And even if they did see the dangers, they are not able to respond.

All of them are mute dogs unable to bark,

They see reality incorrectly as those in a dream. They prefer the dream.

Dreamers lying down, who love to slumber;

The lack of discernment and diligence is a consequence of their own immoral lifestyles.

¹¹ And the dogs are greedy, they are not satisfied.
And they are shepherds who have no understanding;
They have all turned to their own way, Each one to his unjust gain, to the last one.

This is a poetic link back to chapter 53 with a little twist: there, we were sheep who have all gone our own way and we need someone to redeem us, to die in our place. These are the shepherds who have all gone their own way. These shepherds have no understanding because they have given themselves over to insatiable greed. They have rejected the law of God as the governing force of society. They have turned to their own way to get what they want. Isaiah says they have turned to unjust gain. Not just gain but “unjust gain.” Gain could be unjust by violating civil law, such as outright theft. It could also be unjust by staying within civil law but violating moral law, using deceptive practices in businesses, or leveraging the less wealthy off their land, or delaying payment to poor workers, or overworking children.

The leaders of Judah focus on their own wealth and short-term enjoyment with no consideration of the long-term consequences of their irresponsibility.

¹² “Come,” they say, “let us get wine, and let us drink heavily of strong drink;
And tomorrow will be like today, only more so.”

That’s what is going on at the top levels of Judah. The leaders are drivers of hardship in society. Their failure to lead with integrity and responsibility opens society to threat, imagined by Isaiah as beasts. Society is vulnerable. The leaders bear significant responsibility. They are supposed to be watchmen and shepherds, looking out for dangers to the people. They are supposed to warn, and guide, and protect. The good shepherd cares for the well-being of the flock. These leaders care for their own selfish desires. They abuse the sheep unjustly. We began the passage with an invitation to beasts to “Come and eat.” We end the passage with the leaders feasting in oblivion to the danger they invite into society. And in their narrow minded, self-centered greed, they dream that they will feed off society day after day with no consequences.

The failure of godly leadership at the top of society does nothing to address a deeper problem spreading at the ground level of society. The leaders are not the only problem. The people of Judah have left behind Covenant with God to seek other sources of spiritual power. A shift in who a people worships is always accompanied by a shift in thinking and a shift in behavior. This society has turned to its own way, worshiping contrary to the way of God, thinking contrary to the way of God, and behaving contrary to the way of God.

Isaiah describes the pervasive problem in 57:1-21. Two different parties are present in the society of Judah, the righteous and the wicked. The passage has an interesting A, B, A, B structure. Isaiah starts with a two-verse introduction of the righteous who are promised peace. Then he gives us a longer description of the wicked, described as the “prostitute’s children.” He follows that with a longer description of the righteous, described as “God’s household.” And he ends with a two-verse

- ¹² "I will declare your righteousness and your deeds,
But they will not profit you.
- ¹³ "When you cry out, let your collection of idols But the wind will carry all of them up,
deliver you. And a breath will take them away.
But he who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land And will possess My holy mountain."

The sexual language of "adulterer" and "prostitute" are spiritual metaphors here. Like a man who has turned from the covenant of marriage to a prostitute, so are the people of Judah who have turned from Covenant relationship with Yahweh to the worship of false gods. The prostitute's children are described as disrespectful, rude, bullying children in 3-5.

- ³ "But you come here, sons of a sorceress,
Offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute.
- ⁴ "Against whom do you jest? Against whom do you open wide your mouth
And stick out your tongue?
Are you not children of rebellion, Offspring of deceit,
- ⁵ Who inflame yourselves among the oaks, Under every luxuriant tree,
Who slaughter the children in the ravines, Under the clefts of the crags?"

I assume these children are making fun of the children of God who live according to God's ways. Isaiah calls them, "children of deceit." They scoff at the wisdom of God, but the dreams they call true are destroying society. The charge of inflaming themselves among the oaks is not a pure spiritual metaphor. Canaanite religion recognized the tree as a symbol of fertility. The fertility cult encouraged sexual rites as an act of worship. The practitioner sought to earn a god's favor through sex with a temple prostitute in order to have children, or to increase the fruitfulness of crops, or to gain some other benefit. 2 Kings 23:7 reports that sometime during the reign of Manasseh or his son Amon, temple prostitution had even made its way into the Temple of God.

The connection between false worship and ungodly sexual practices is a long one. Idolatry and illicit sexual activity were connected 700 years before Isaiah by Moses in Leviticus 18-20, and 700 years after Isaiah by Paul in Romans 1:18-32. It's not easy to explain whether false worship leads to perverted desires, or whether perverted desires lead us to false worship. On one hand, we fashion our gods to fit our desires, And on the other one, we become like the gods we serve.

This is true of present Western society. One of the reasons to turn from God to paganism is to give free reign to sexual desire. Sexual restriction is considered oppressive. What God calls good is made out to be bad. So, society either molds God into a new permissive image, or turns to other gods, or rejects the idea of spiritual authority altogether. Leaders of this kind of thinking are like those blind watchmen who invite beasts to come in and feed. While giving free reign to their own desires, they fail to discern the threat to society that comes with false gods they have set up to validate their behavior. They dream a false and destructive dream.

The Judeans have largely turned to the more permissive pagan gods. Illicit sex is not the worst of their sins. The children of the prostitute have embraced the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice associated with the god Molech. "They slaughter the children in the ravines under the clefts of the crags." There is hardly a better example of self-destruction in a society. I think we see it in a different way in modern Western society. For example, to imagine a society that would allow prepubescent children to go through gender re-assignment. We are sacrificing children to the gods that allow our own permissive behavior. It's a dream; it's an unhealthy dream. It's a false view that threatens society.

In verse 6, the second person pronoun, "you," shifts to a feminine singular. So, from the plural, "you all," to the singular, "you." Isaiah is moving from a description of the prostitute's children to a description of the prostitute. Motyer says we should understand this passage as the urge in human beings to turn away from the goodness and stability of life with God to find stability and satisfaction of desire elsewhere. That is the spirit of the prostitute. Human flesh is wayward in and of itself. At the same time, Satan and his demons

have His Word, but they go farther and farther afield. Their tireless search parodies the promise of God in 40:31 that,

those who wait for the LORD	Will gain new strength;
They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles,	They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.	

But these find renewed strength, they do not faint in their vain search for something else. God asks, about their motivation in verses 11-12.

¹¹ "Of whom were you worried and fearful and did not remember Me Was I not silent even for a long time	When you lied, Nor give Me a thought? So you do not fear Me?
¹² "I will declare your righteousness	and your deeds, But they will not profit you.

Fear, respect, awe of the Lord, that's the beginning of wisdom. So says Proverbs, so says Job, so says Ecclesiastes. But the fear of the Lord has ceased to motivate this society. They have no sense of the real presence of God. Verse 13 concludes this longer description of the wicked.

¹³ "When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you. But he who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land	But the wind will carry all of them up, And a breath will take them away. And will possess My holy mountain."
--	---

The spirit of the prostitute deep within the human heart leads the people of Judah away from God to the failed security of false gods. That last line of verse 13 transitions us towards a description of God's house. That last line of verse 13 transitions us from the wicked to the righteous. The language of the beatitudes is present there in more than one place in this passage. Isaiah says, "he who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land." Jesus says in Matthew 5:5, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." The Kingdom of God belongs to the meek, to those who take refuge in Him. They will be declared children of God. The description of God's household is in verses 14-19.

God's Household (14-19)

¹⁴ And it will be said, "Build up, build up, prepare the way,	Remove every obstacle out of the way of My people."
¹⁵ For thus says the high and exalted One "I dwell on a high and holy place, In order to revive the spirit of the lowly	Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit And to revive the heart of the contrite.
¹⁶ "For I will not contend forever, For the spirit would grow faint before Me,	Nor will I always be angry; And the breath of those whom I have made.
¹⁷ "Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry	and struck him; I hid My face and was angry, And he went on turning away, in the way of his heart.
¹⁸ "I have seen his ways, but I will heal him;	I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners,
¹⁹ Creating the praise of the lips.	Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near," Says the LORD, "and I will heal him."

The righteous were introduced as a persecuted people in Judah who somehow had access to the peace of God. In this passage, that inheritance of peace is connected with the future coming of the Messiah.

¹⁴ And it will be said, "Build up, build up, prepare the way,	Remove every obstacle out of the way of My people."
---	--

That clear way for the people of God is connected to the clear way of the Messiah who is coming. Specifically, it will be said by John the Baptist who comes as the forerunner to Jesus, declaring the

Lesson 38 Isaiah 58 A True Fast – Desiring God and Loving People

Introduction

Isaiah 56-66, the Book of the Anointed Conqueror, has three parts. We are in the first part. This first part has three sections. The first section, 56:1-8, described an ideal picture of God's people, inclusive of foreigners and eunuchs who have joined themselves to the Lord, obeying from the heart. They love the name of the Lord. They hold fast to His Covenant. They find joy in His Temple.

Our second section, 56:9-57:21, shifted from this ideal picture of God's people to the actual state of Judah at the time of Isaiah's writing. A remnant of believers is oppressed in a society given over to idolatry and to the selfish pursuits and unjust gain reflective of the idol-gods they worship.

It is too simple, however, to say that Judah's problem is all in their false worship of pagan gods. The beginning of our third section, Isaiah 58, exposes hollow worship of Yahweh. Two kinds of idolatry exists in Judah. These two kinds of idolatry can be painted with broad strokes as an idolatry of the left and an idolatry of the right. The idolatry of the left is progressive. It is a turning away from the conservative religion of Israel to embrace the gods of the nations, whether they are the regional Canaanite gods of the land, or the gods further afield in the cultural centers of Mesopotamia and Egypt. These gods are pragmatic and powerful, promising to fulfill the lust of our eyes and the lust of our flesh. They are not so concerned with morality. They offer a formula for success and satisfaction. They are malleable. They are numerous, you can find one to fit whatever cause drives you. They allow for self-definition. You set the agenda by choosing your gods according to your own plans. That is the idolatry of the left.

Chapter 58 addresses what I am calling the idolatry of the right. This is the use of conservative religion to bless one's own agenda, to guarantee your own success. Ritual worship of Yahweh continues. He is the God of the nation. People continue to observe some of the feasts. They continue to offer sacrifice. They continue to pray in the Temple. This ritualistic holding on to the forms of Biblical religion is in truth another form of idolatry. It is an attempt to get God on the side of Israel. Yahweh is being treated as a god of the land as though He will reward those who conserve the form of Mosaic religion even if it's a means of accomplishing their own agenda.

The angel of the Lord told Joshua, long ago, He is not on anyone's side. God is on His own side. He does not exist to fulfill our desires. We exist to delight in Him and His ways. God desires worshipers who worship Him in spirit and in truth, pursuing His desires, His agenda, not their own. That's the first warning sign we recognize in this chapter. Isaiah is asking, "Whose desires are you really pursuing when you claim to pursue Yahweh?" The second warning sign Isaiah highlights is the failure of this conservative right to act on behalf of the oppressed. True worship of God will be revealed by a humble heart whose love for God is manifested in acts of love for people. This is the theme of chapter 58, "Religious ritual honors God when God's desires are put first in both ritual and life. Blessing follows, not as a reward, but as the right outcome of God-honoring relationship."

I'm going to start by considering this critique in Isaiah 58:1-14, and then I'm going to ask our third big-picture interpretation question to help us think about this chapter from a New Covenant perspective.

I. A critique of religion (58:1-14)

Motyer identifies a chiastic structure for Isaiah's critique in chapter 58.

A The voice of rebuke (1)

B A fast without a blessing: the false exposed, the afflictive emphasis (2-5)

C Contrast: the Lord's chosen fast and its blessings (6-12)

B' A fast with a blessing: the true commended, the joy emphasis (13-14a)⁸⁸

A' The voice of promise (14b-d)

⁸⁸ M J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 478-479

Isaiah begins and ends with a voice. 58:1 is a voice of rebuke and 58:14 a voice of promise. The inner frame of the passage contrasts a fast with a feast. 6-12 is a fast without blessing. 13-14a is a feast with blessing. The center of the passage describes the kind of fast that God does bless.

I will repeat our theme, “Religious ritual honors God when God’s desires are put first in both ritual and life. Blessing follows, not as a reward, but as the right outcome of God-honoring relationship.”

We start with the voice of rebuke and the kind of fast that brings no blessing. This is Isaiah 58:1-5.

A. and B. A voice of rebuke followed by a fast with no blessing (1–5)

¹ Cry loudly, do not hold back; And declare to My people their transgression	Raise your voice like a trumpet, And to the house of Jacob their sins.
² Yet they seek Me day by day As a nation that has done righteousness They ask Me for just decisions,	and delight to know My ways, And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They delight in the nearness of God.
³ ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?’	Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’
Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire,	And drive hard all your workers.
⁴ Behold, you fast for contention and strife You do not fast like you do today	and to strike with a wicked fist. to make your voice heard on high.
⁵ Is it a fast like this which I choose, Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed Will you call this a fast,	a day for a man to humble himself? And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? even an acceptable day to the LORD?

The voices of rebuke sets the tone for the chapter.

¹ “Cry loudly, do not hold back; And declare to My people their transgression	Raise your voice like a trumpet, And to the house of Jacob their sins.
---	---

This passage is going to be about the transgression of Judah. Notice also the reference to Jacob. This is a rebuke for all the Jews living in Judah, no matter what tribe they are from. The reference to Jacob is a reminder that we are dealing with all God’s Covenant people, and Isaiah is performing the role of a covenant lawsuit prophet. He is calling the children of Jacob to come back to the kind of worship and obedience God enjoys. Isaiah is going to end chapter 58 with a repeat reference to Jacob that ties the whole section together.

After that initial rebuke, the three lines of verse 2 seem to describe a people earnestly seeking God through their religious rituals.

² Yet they seek Me day by day As a nation that has done righteousness They ask Me for just decisions,	and delight to know My ways, And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They delight in the nearness of God.
--	--

Isaiah is setting us up here for an immediate reversal. These people may be going through the motions of seeking God day by day. They may appear to delight in knowing God’s ways. They may act like a nation that has done righteousness and not forsaken God’s laws. They may ask for just decisions and even show some kind of delight in feeling like they are close to God.

But is there a way for us to determine the sincerity of this religious behavior? Are they really good people who love God? How can we know the heart behind the ritual?

The question that follows in 3a starts to show us the heart.

³ ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?’	Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’
---	---

That’s an interesting question. Is that the cry of a sincere heart, struggling with the silence of God? “God, why don’t you answer us? We love you! We want to hear from you!” Or is that the complaint of a religious people who have done their part and now expect God to do His part? “We’ve fasted. We’ve humbled. Why aren’t you holding up to your end of the agreement, God? Why haven’t you blessed us in return?”

Why indeed? Do you want to know why you are not getting the results you were hoping for? Let me tell you why! Verses 3b-4.

Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, And drive hard all your workers.
4 Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

Delight and desire are key words throughout this chapter. Two questions have to be considered. “Whose desire are you seeking to meet when you fast?” And, “What is it that you really desire?”

“On the day of your fast you find your desire.” The key word there is “your.” On the day of your fast you find YOUR desire. The point of a fast is to put aside what you desire to focus on something that is more important. Fasting is not a formula for gain. Fasting does not earn points with God. If I give up food, it’s not a deal where, if I give up food, God gives me success in my business. The point is not to gain your desire, but to bring your desires in line with God’s desires, to give up food to remind yourself that God’s and His Word are more important to life than food.

The first problem then is that even though they fast, they fast to accomplish their own desires. The second problem is what they desire, “on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers.” They desire business success. That’s obvious in how they treat their workers and conduct their business. “You fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.” They are ruthless in business. This kind of fasting is not going to “make your voice heard on high.” What does God care that you gave up eating, or that spend your whole day in church, or that you drop a wad of money in the offering box, or you sing with a happy face, or you’ve served on three committees? God sees your heart. God sees your behavior.

God asks in verse 5 whether they really believe their ritual actions of fasting pleases Him.

5 Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?

God does approve of this kind of fast when it expresses a contrite and broken heart. Genuine humility pleases God. “Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3).” But God takes no joy at all from the ritual act of humility when that act is simply an attempt to manipulate a desired response from God.

By way of contrast, the kind of fast God blesses is described in the center of our passage in 58:6-12.

C. Contrast: the Lord’s chosen fast and its blessings (6–12)

6 Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke?
7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’
If you remove the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,
10 And if you give yourself to the hungry And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness, And your gloom will become like midday.
11 And the LORD will continually guide you, And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones; And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.
12 Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach, The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

True worship of Yahweh moves the worshiper to social action. Love for God with heart, mind, and strength flows naturally into love for neighbor. We are right to question whether the one who professes to love God in church is rightly interpreting their religious experience if their commitment to God does not lead to care for the oppressed and the afflicted. That's the logic taught here by Isaiah.

The social action described here is a concrete expression of the command that began the Book of the Conqueror back in 56:1, "preserve justice and do righteousness." What does that look like? Isaiah's giving us examples of what that looks like. This text follows an, "a-b, a-b" pattern, where, "a," is the concrete expression of social action and, "b," is a description of spiritual blessing that follows.

a. social action (6-7)

The first emphasis of social action is in verses 6 and 7.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 6 Is this not the fast which I choose, | To loosen the bonds of wickedness, |
| And to let the oppressed go free | To undo the bands of the yoke, |
| 7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry | And break every yoke? |
| When you see the naked, to cover him; | And bring the homeless poor into the house; |
| | And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? |

Self-abasement for selfish reasons does not impress God at all. But self-denial for the benefit of others, especially for the powerless, that is the kind of fast God chooses. In this context, loosening the bonds of wickedness means working in society to free people who are economically oppressed. The emphasis is not on the psychological sense of oppression, not on being a victim, but on the practical problem of poverty. Isaiah addresses the essentials necessary for human life: food, shelter, and clothing. God says, "Fast in this way." Do without some of your time and some of your money to share bread with the hungry, to provide homes for the homeless and to cover those who are naked.

Verse 7 ends with the admonishment, "Do not hide yourself from your own flesh." What does that mean? Do not hide yourself? Do not hide yourself from your own flesh. Isaiah just said, "When you see the naked, cover him." "Do not hide" means, "Do not turn your eyes away. Do not retreat into your comfortable home in your comfortable neighborhood." "Do not hide" because that poor person "is your own flesh." You share a human bond with every person you see. We are all created in God's image. We are all His. Remember the good Samaritan. He did not turn and hide when he saw the hurting Jew.

The motive for this kind of fast is love for God and love for those God loves. We do not fast to seek our own desires. We fast to seek His desire, to seek what pleases Him. And there is right reward, a right outcome, when we seek the desire of God. That right outcome is the blessing described in 8-9a.

b. Personal and spiritual rewards (8-9a)

- | | |
|---|--|
| 8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, | And your recovery will speedily spring forth; |
| And your righteousness will go before you; | The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. |
| 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; | You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' |

The restoration of society is the reward for pursuing God and caring for the poor and oppressed. Judah will then be a light to the nations. Her own recovery will be speedy. Righteousness going before and the glory of God as a rear guard communicates protection. The blessings here are blessings for the whole society. So, we should also think of the social action in the previous section as a communal effort. We do not address the needs of the poor all on our own. We do so as members of a body. We come together to provide food, and clothing, and shelter.

At the beginning of the chapter, the stable and wealthy in society fasted together for protection from enemies and for economic provision. They want a growing, expanding, strong, fruitful Judah. And they want it for their selfish interests. That's why they engage in religious ritual to Yahweh. Yahweh is a means to an end. They fast to Him, so that He will bless their agenda. But their lack of social care

for the needy reveals a self-centeredness at the heart of their political, economic, and religious agenda that God will not bless.

But those who truly draw near to God with a sincere desire to know God do not pray in order to convince God to give them what they want. They pray so that they might participate in achieving what God wants, His desires. They keep the commands of God out of love for God with a heart that seeks God's glory, His agenda for Judah. Keeping God's ceremonial commands goes hand in hand with keeping God's social commands. They do not want society purely to benefit them. They want a society that glorifies God. And so, that is their reward. Because they have engaged in social care for the needy, they have become a light that represents God Himself. The result of pursuing God's agenda for society is restoration and protection.

And to make sure we do not side-step the importance of loving our neighbor, Isaiah repeats the emphasis on social action. We love our neighbor because we love God. This is God's desire. Blessing follows when it is set in the right order. Social action is repeated in 9b-10a.

a' Social action (9b-10a)

If you remove the yoke from your midst,	The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,
¹⁰ And if you give yourself to the hungry	And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,

If you will engage in care for the needy, then you will experience God's blessing in your society. The blessing is repeated in 10b-12.

b' Personal and spiritual rewards (10c-12)

Then your light will rise in darkness	And your gloom will become like midday.
¹¹ And the LORD will continually guide you,	And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;	And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water	whose waters do not fail.
¹² Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;	You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,	The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

Though spoken to Judah in Isaiah's own time, the blessing suggested here looks ahead to fulfillment at, at least, two different points of time in the future. The end of the passage with the rebuilding of the ruins and repairing the breach looks ahead to the people's return from exile. But they have not even gone into exile, yet. It is as though Isaiah knows this generation will not turn from its mix of pagan idolatry and hypocritical Yahweh worship. They will continue in the pursuit of their own pleasure in their own way. Knowing that, this passage is a promise for a future generation that will acknowledge their sin and turn to God in a real way that results in love for the downtrodden. They are the ones who will experience God's light shine on them. They will experience God's guidance and provision of fresh water, literally and spiritually. They will rebuild the ancient ruins of a conquered Jerusalem. They will raise up the foundations, repair the breach, and restore the streets in which to dwell. This is Nehemiah and Ezra and all those who return with them, if they will love God by loving all of God's people. And yet, we know how that story is going to turn out. Ezra and Nehemiah both lead a people struggling against waywardness, who don't persist in pagan idolatry, but do fail to faithfully live according to the Covenant of God.

There is a second context alluded to here, one even further in the future. "Then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like a midday." That kind of language takes us all the way back to Isaiah chapter 9, "There will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish...The people who walk in darkness will see a great light...a child will be born to us...and his name will be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, eternal father, prince of peace." That language speaks of both the first and second comings of Jesus Christ, first to initiate His Kingdom on Earth, and finally to establish His Kingdom in a New Heaven and New Earth. I have not developed that idea because Isaiah is going to in upcoming chapters.

The emphasis here in chapter 58 is not on the coming blessing, but on the kind of fast God desires that will result in such a blessing. This call to sincere worship is not new in Isaiah. This passage

parallels the exhortation that was made all the way back in 1:10-20. There Isaiah accused the people of bringing to God worthless sacrifices (1:13) and lifting bloody hands of oppression in prayer (1:15). Isaiah exhorted the people, “learn to do good; seek justice; reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan; plead for the widow (1:17).” Genuine love for God leads to a genuine care for God’s people. This active moral vision that God expects of His people remains true even after having recognized that those people will be declared righteous not by what they do, but through the grace of the Suffering Servant. His atoning death is not a reason to ignore what is right. His atoning death provides a new kind of motivation for doing what is right.

God calls His people, who are in true relationship with Him to fast. He calls us at times to put aside what we desire and to pursue what He desires. He also calls his people to feast. We began this chapter with a voice of rebuke followed by a fast that brought no blessing. We end the chapter with a feast that brings blessing followed by a voice of promise. This is 58:13-14.

B’ and A’ A feast with a blessing followed by a voice of blessing (13–14)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>¹³ If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot
And call the sabbath a delight,
And honor it, desisting from your own ways,</p> <p>¹⁴ Then you will take delight in the LORD,
And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob
your father,</p> | <p>From doing your own pleasure on My holy day,
the holy day of the LORD honorable,
From seeking your own pleasure and speaking
your own word,
And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.</p> |
|---|--|

The Sabbath was not considered a day of fasting in Israel. It was a holy day, a feast day. The words used for, “delight,” back in verses 2 and 3 are the same Hebrew word group as the word, “pleasure,” repeated here in verse 13 and the word, “delight,” in verse 14. We can seek to take delight in the Lord in a way that keeps our own experience and blessings as primary, or we can seek to delight in the Lord in a way that recognizes Him as the primary object of our delight. Isaiah urges us here to set aside our own ways, our own pleasure, and our own word. Instead, seek the Lord. The Sabbath will become a delight when knowing and honoring God is your heart’s desire.

Isaiah says here, “when you learn to turn your foot aside from your own pleasures and your own words, then you will take delight in the Lord.” The joy is not the goal of the Sabbath. God is the goal of the Sabbath. God is the reward, and joy follows.

The passage ends with a voice of promise in 14b. The voice is not the voice of the prophet. It is the voice of God. When we turn from our pleasure and treat the Sabbath with honor as a time to seek God and His will, then we will enter into genuine relationship with God. Having come to know God and delight in Him, He makes this promise,

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>¹⁴ [...] And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob
your father,</p> | <p>And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.</p> |
|--|--|

This is not blessing as a reward for religious behavior. This is the blessing that comes from truly knowing God. That’s Isaiah 58, and that’s the first half of this lesson. You could pause here and take a break before we get into the second half of this lesson. In the second half I’m addressing the third interpretation question, “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?”

II. A Third Interpretation Question – “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?”

I introduced two big picture interpretation questions in each of our first two lessons on the Book of the Conqueror. I have this one more major interpretation question, “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?” I am going to explain that. But before I do, here is a quick reminder of our first two big-picture interpretation questions.

1. What further theological development is Isaiah making in chapters 56-66?

The first question we asked was the question of theological development. “What further theological development do we see in Isaiah 56-66?” Isaiah could have stopped after the climactic revelation of the Suffering Servant in chapter 53, followed by the double invitation to come to the table in chapters 54 and 5. He could have stopped. He did not. This question assumes that Isaiah does not stop because he has something to say that he has not yet said. Something new to add or some theme to further develop.

I suggested in our first lesson two major themes Isaiah further develops in these chapters; the theme of the Messiah and the theme of righteousness. In the first book we recognize our need for an ideal king. In the second book we find out that we also need an ideal servant. The Servant dies in our place. Does the story end there? No. We see in this third book that the king who dies is also the king who conquers. That’s the development of the Messiah theme.

Isaiah also has more to say about righteousness. In the first book, the people of God are called to be righteous even though they consistently fail. In the second book, God exerts His own righteousness to save through the death of the Servant. Is that the end of righteousness? Is there now no motive or obligation for God’s people to pursue righteousness? No! The story does not end. The obligation remains, as we here in chapter 58. Submitting in right relationship to God and desiring what God desires is going to lead to righteous behavior in social action. So that’s our first big-picture interpretation question. We are asking, “What further theological development do we see in Isaiah 56-66?”.

2. Who is Isaiah’s audience?

And to rightly interpret what Isaiah is communicating theologically, we need to ask our second big-picture interpretation question, “Who is Isaiah speaking to?”, or, “Who is Isaiah’s audience?” The primary meaning of Isaiah’s words are what they meant for the original audience. Was that original audience a 21st century community? Of course not. Was that audience a gathered church made up of people professing faith in the Messiah? No. That audience to whom Isaiah was speaking was the nation of Judah. And as a theocratic country governed by the laws of Moses, all of the Jews in that society owed Covenant allegiance to Yahweh. But, as we have already seen, the majority of those who worship God do so in ritual only. They are also pursuing the gods of the land. They are a nation of believers but only in a culturally religious sense of believers. There is just a remnant in the society that has a saving faith, the true faith in Yahweh. And understanding that this is the audience helps us interpret texts like chapter 58 accurately.

3. How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?

Now for our third big-picture interpretation question, “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?”

The goal in asking this question is not to reinterpret the text to fit the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Full knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes progressively in Scripture. Though some things are made known by the prophets, like the details we get in Isaiah 53, even great prophets like Isaiah saw only in part and longed for the full revelation of the Messiah. A much more full revelation is not going to come until the Word is made flesh and born as a child in Bethlehem. Even then, Jesus did not explain everything about Himself and about the salvation He brings while He was on Earth. After His death and resurrection, He continued to make truth known through the Holy Spirit, speaking through men like Matthew, and John, and Peter, and Paul.

God has progressively revealed truth about Jesus Christ and the salvation He brings in Scripture. And with the end of Scripture, that progressive revelation is now closed. Isaiah was able to say in his day,

I proclaim to you new things from this time, even hidden things which you have not known.
They are created now and not long ago and before today you have not heard them. (48:6-7)

Isaiah is revealing new revelation. These are things that were not spoken of before. In the same way, though much later, Paul says in his day, “[Glory forever be to the only wise God] who is able to

establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested...(Romans 16:25)."

So there were some things that were not made known before. They were kept secret until Jesus came; before His life, and His death on the cross, and His resurrection. And Paul can say these things that were secret have now been made manifest. So, we are not supposed to force all the details of this new revelation back onto the older prophecies. That is not the goal by asking, "How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help us to interpret the text?" But we are recognizing that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament text and thus, the key to rightly understanding truths these prophecies pointed towards.

My assertion that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the central truth by which we understand all of Scripture is grounded in these four presuppositions.

First, Jesus Christ is fully God. He existed before the creation of the world as God the Son. (John 1:1).

Second, the plan of salvation was determined before creation with full knowledge by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that humankind would fall into sin and be redeemed by the sacrificial death of God the Son (Ephesians 1:4).

Third, though God knows all that has happened or will happen, He has chosen to reveal truth to us in the Bible progressively, over time (Deuteronomy 29:29; Ephesians 3:9).

Fourth, salvation history is consistent with and finds fulfillment in the first and second comings of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:44, and Romans 3:31).

A lot more can be said about the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the center of our worldview and how it's been revealed progressively from Genesis through to Revelation, but I'm going to leave it at that for now. Remember, the reason I am bringing this up is to support my claim that good interpretation of any section of Scripture has this big-picture question in mind, "How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?" not as an attempt to read later details back into previous ages, but as a recognition that the Gospel of Jesus Christ fulfills and makes sense of all the truths in Scripture.

We can use the two questions of covenant to apply a Gospel lens to the Old Testament.

To use the Gospel as a lens for helping us understand the Old Testament, we do have the difficulty of recognizing what remains consistent throughout the Bible and what changes? That's the issue of the new wineskin. We cannot treat the New Covenant as Old Covenant 2.0. It is not just a new version. That would be putting new wine into an old wineskin, and it would burst. It doesn't work. So we need some way to organize in our mind what stays the same and what changes: to recognize both continuity and discontinuity.

I'd like to use the two questions of Covenant to help me organize my Gospel thinking. I've taught on the two questions in other places, so I will not go into a big explanation here. Instead, I'll refer you to my Pentateuch podcast on Genesis 12-15, where Abraham is reckoned righteous by faith, and to my Romans podcast on 7:1-6, "The New Way of the Spirit." Both of those go in depth into the two questions. You can also go back to our third lesson in Isaiah, when we cover chapters 1:10-31. I mentioned the two questions there. Or you could download the article at observetheword.com posted on the homepage about the two questions of Covenant.

The two questions essentially address the issues of justification and sanctification using Covenant language. And that is helpful for two reasons. First, the language of Covenant is used consistently from the beginning of the Bible to the end of the Bible. And second, the language of Covenant is relational.

The first question of Covenant asks, "What makes me righteous enough to be accepted into relationship with holy God?" We can answer that question in terms of grace, what God does for you, and Law, what you must do. Most people want to answer that as 60/40 or 90/10. The Biblical answer is 100/0. The only way for a human being to be righteous enough to be in relationship with God is if that

human being stands 100% on the grace of God and 0% on their own obedience. Jesus hammers this truth home in the Sermon on the Mount when he says our righteousness must exceed the Pharisees, that we must be perfect as God is perfect. Murder, He says, is not only when you kill someone. It is not only outward action. It is also words of hate. In fact, it is thoughts of hate. When you disdain another life in your mind, you break the moral law of God. Likewise adultery. When you engage in sexual desire in your mind, you break the moral law of God. Jesus teaches that the just result of breaking the moral law in your mind is Hell. You have this guarantee: you will sin. If there is a way for you to break Covenant faithfulness with God, you will do it. The only way you can exist in relationship with holy God is if holy God takes it on Himself 100% responsibility for the relationship: 100% grace, 0% your obedience. In this answer we see complete continuity from Genesis to Revelation. The only way for human beings to be in relationship with God is through grace received by faith. That is Genesis 15. That is Isaiah 53. That is Romans 3:19-30. The basis for our relationship does not change, even though our understanding of how this grace is provided is progressively revealed over time.

This brings us to the second question of Covenant. "Now that I am in relationship with holy God by grace through faith, how then ought I live?" Answering again in terms of God's part and my part, I give it 100% grace and 100% Law. I call that, "the marriage conference answer." It's bad math, but it's good relationship. God always gives 100% of Himself to relationship with us. We never give 100% of ourselves to Him, but that does not stop us from recognizing it is right to do so. We believe it is right to love God with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our strength every moment, even if we do consistently fall short of that moral vision. Thank the Lord that we are not judged by that standard to be made acceptable. He takes care of the first question of Covenant for us, so that we no longer live under a standard of Law. We are freed to pursue a vision of righteousness. When we fall short, we get up again and keep going. We live life as a response to God's grace, not a pursuit of God's acceptance.

Now, regarding the second question, I'll mention a couple of things in the area of continuity, and a couple of things in the area of discontinuity. (1) First, the call to heart obedience as a response to salvation by grace is continuous. The call of loving obedience is not new with John 14. It is a major theme of Deuteronomy. Consider Deuteronomy 10:12. "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

(2) The moral nature of God is a second area of continuity. Ritual requirements may change from covenant to covenant. Sabbath observance, food regulations, circumcision, other rituals may or may not be required under any given covenant. But the moral law of God remain consistent because the moral law of God is an expression of the nature of who God is. And God's moral nature never changes.

Speaking of the continuity of moral commands brings up an area of major discontinuity. A lot of the ceremonial and civil law in the Old Covenant is not necessarily moral law. If God says to do something, it would be immoral not to obey God as our right authority if He said, "Do it!" You know, if He says, "Don't eat chocolate!", then we should not eat chocolate, not because chocolate is bad or sinful, but because God gave us a direct command. So, circumcision: there is nothing moral about circumcising or not circumcising, it's just, did God tell you to do it? And so, under one covenant we might have a certain set of ritual, or ceremonies, or civil requirements that then are not re-instituted under a new covenant. And if they are not re-instituted under the new covenant, there is no moral obligation to obey those ceremonies or rituals. There is discontinuity.

Two additional areas of discontinuity that we see from Old Covenant to New Covenant are the definition of God's Covenant people – there is a significant change there - and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That's something really new about the New Covenant. So, under the Old Covenant, God's people are defined geographically and politically with a spiritual remnant existing within the nation. Under the New Covenant, God's people are defined as a Church, and it's given us spiritual definition as those who believe in Jesus Christ. So there is change there. And a major newness that marks this

New Covenant people is that God now indwells as His temple in a way that was not fully present in the Old Covenant. So this is one of the challenges with the second question of Covenant: how, then, shall I live? Because there is continuity to that answer in some things from Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, to the New Covenant, but there is also discontinuity from one covenant to the other.

Okay, so now going back to interpreting the Old Covenant through a Gospel lens. With any biblical text, I can ask, “do I see the first question of Covenant under consideration here?” And, “do I see the second question of Covenant under consideration here?” And if I see the second question of Covenant under consideration, I can ask, “what here is specific to the Covenant this particular audience is under, whether it’s Abrahamic, Mosaic, or the New Covenant; and what is not specific to the Covenant but it always true?”

Okay. So now, let me give you an example of how I use the two questions of Covenant to apply a Gospel lens to a chapter like Isaiah 58.

Let’s apply the two questions of covenant to Isaiah 58.

1) First, I am wondering how the first question of Covenant is in play here. Is Isaiah is speaking to Jews who have believed in God as Lord and Savior but are failing to live in a way that is honoring to God? Verse 2 sounds like true believers.

² Yet they seek Me day by day As a nation that has done righteousness They ask Me for just decisions,	and delight to know My ways, And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They delight in the nearness of God.
--	--

That sounds like a people who know and enjoy God. And if so, the next line is the genuine, searching question of the believer who does not understand why life with God is not abundant.

³ ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?’	Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’
---	---

But the next line immediately points us toward a significant problem.

Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, And drive hard all your workers.

Now we have reason to wonder about the initial language of delighting in the nearness of God. Did they really delight in the nearness of God, or were they motivated by the fulfillment of their own desires? As we go through the passage, we are going to see that those verses are full of irony. We are going to learn that the outward religious appearance of seeking God in reality masks the self-centered motives and ungodly behavior of these people. Their harshness towards a weakened society shows that they have not understood the first question of Covenant. These are not those who truly believe in God. Isaiah is describing the hypocrisy of religious formality.

2) Understanding the two questions of Covenant also helps me interpret Isaiah’s answer for this religious hypocrisy. This people fails to experience God’s protection and provision because they go through ritual motions to get blessed, while oppressing and ignoring the less fortunate. Is the answer, to be better? If we are loving of our neighbor, then God will have to bless us. The right formula is not ritual alone. The right formula is ritual plus love for the weak and needy. That’s how we, as God’s people, are going to get our prayers answered.

And we could come up with that interpretation from verse 6-8.

⁶ Is this not the fast which I choose, And to let the oppressed go free	To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And break every yoke?
⁷ Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry When you see the naked, to cover him;	And bring the homeless poor into the house; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
⁸ Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your righteousness will go before you;	And your recovery will speedily spring forth; The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

If the Israelites care for the oppressed and poor, God will go before and behind them. He will protect them and the recovery of their society will be swift. That is what the text says. But our correct understanding of the text is helped by our understanding of the Gospel. God's people are not blessed as a formulaic reward for good behavior. Jews are accepted completely by God's grace, 1st question. Having been accepted by God's grace, they respond from the heart in loving obedience, seeking the desire of God that the weak and needy be cared for, 2nd question.

Loving their neighbor as a heart response comes from relationship with God, and that is consistent with Deuteronomy 10 and later with John 14. And it is, in fact, the truth that we see Isaiah communicating when we take in the whole passage.

Isaiah tells his audience that they need a heart change. They need God to take central place in their lives. They do not do good to earn God's blessing. They do good because they have recognized God as central. They truly delight in Him and now they want to serve Him, and blessing is naturally going to follow. That is the solution in verses 13 and 14a.

¹³ If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot And call the sabbath a delight, And honor it, desisting from your own ways,	From doing your own pleasure on My holy day, the holy day of the LORD honorable, From seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word,
---	--

¹⁴ Then you will take delight in the LORD,

A change of heart towards God in religious practices will manifest in a change of heart towards other people, and that will result in blessing on society.

3) Okay, now third, having applied the two questions of Covenant as a lens for reflection on what Isaiah is teaching his original audience, we can consider how this passage applies to us, who live under the New Covenant. We have to consider the issues of continuity and discontinuity.

Continuity may be the easier question because it comes naturally. What here is true to my New Covenant relationship with God? And I see this basic principle for them is the same for me, "Seek first to delight in God." His desires are central, not my desires. Seeking His desires is going to direct me to love and care for people. And this truth flows out of my security in Christ.

It flows out of the answer to the first question of the Covenant. I am not seeking God first as a means of salvation. My ability to love God's people well enough is not what saves me and brings me blessing. I have relationship with God by grace through faith. I seek Him first as the right response to this grace, to His love for me. I want to love Him in return because He is kind and awesome. I want to give Him the proper place in my life. And because He is God, that proper place is right at the center. This message to the Old Covenant people of Judah fits right into the New Covenant. It's the same message.

Recognizing that, I also see some discontinuity in the passage, but maybe not a lot in this particular passage.

Under the New Covenant fasting may be present, but there is not a requirement that I fast. Also, Sabbath observance is not the same. The Israelites had very concrete directions on how to obey the Sabbath. We have less. Technically, we do not have any commands at all to keep the Sabbath in a ritual or a ceremonial way. We worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of Christ's resurrection, not on Saturday, the Sabbath, the last day of the week, the day God rested from work.

I'm not going to go more into the Sabbath. That's kind of a tricky question. I'm just pointing out that Sabbath regulation is changed in the New Covenant, however you understand that. And we can see that there is discontinuity between the expectations placed on them, and the expectations placed on us. And we are going to resolve that by looking to the New Covenant and trying to understand what does it mean that Jesus Christ is our Sabbath, and what is God calling us to do under our Covenant.

And though we do not apply the specific Old Covenant requirements of Sabbath each week, I think we can easily see how the principle of Sabbath here applies to our worship on Sunday. We come

together weekly in corporate worship, and our goal should be to turn our hearts and our minds, our words away from our own desires, and to seek God's desire as central. That applies quite well to our New Covenant experience, even if it's on Sunday instead of Saturday.

This thinking in terms of covenant continuity and discontinuity is going to be helpful as we finish out the book of Isaiah. This vision of the Anointed Conqueror is a future vision, and it's a vision that is going to be communicated using the Old Covenant terms of Sabbath, and sacrifice, and priesthood even if it does apply to New Covenant reality. We will have to keep interpreting some of those references from a New Covenant perspective, and it's a perspective that Isaiah saw only dimly, but we see with greater clarity, because we live now in between the first and second coming of the Messiah.

What I hope we see clearly in Isaiah 58 is that, even though Isaiah is speaking to an audience very different from us, under a different covenant than us, the central message applies quite forcefully to us. God does not desire formal religious ritual that we use to get what we want. When God calls us into right relationship with Him, He is calling us to yield to Him as the center of our lives. He is calling us to yield our desires to His desires. True religion seeks the things that God delights in. God's words, God's desires come first. And when we truly yield to His desires, we will begin to do the things that He desires, like caring for the people in society who need help with the basic needs of food, and clothing, and shelter. That's a God desire. The reward of yielding to God's desires comes personally in a growing sense of delight in God. And to love the people He loves becomes our joy. And we don't just experience a personal blessing from putting God's desires first, but when we do that as a community, and as a community we're seeking God, and seeking His desires, and we are caring for those who are in need, then the light of Christ shines among us. And we become like a watered garden. We raise up age-old foundations. We repair the breach and we restore the streets in which to dwell.

Lesson 39 Isaiah 59:1-21 The Conqueror Comes

Introduction

Where are we in the Book of the Conqueror? Isaiah 59 overlaps our first major section and second major section of the book. The Book of the Conqueror covers chapters 56-66. There are two key structural features. First, the beginning and ending of the book depict the inclusion of Gentiles. Second, there is a parallel reference to the coming conqueror on either side of the book's center. One of those references occurs at the end of our present chapter, chapter 59. The other occurs at the beginning of chapter 63.

Following Motyer's structure, those two references to the coming conqueror make up the beginning and end of the book's middle section. That means our first section ends half way through chapter 59, and the middle section starts half way through chapter 59. We are going to do the whole chapter in this lesson, so that we can see how the condemnation of sin in Judah transitions into the vision of the coming conqueror.

The first major section of the Book of the Conqueror has contrasted the ideal vision of God's people with the actual reality of Judah in Isaiah's present context. We've seen two kinds of idolatry. The idolatry on the left, that embraces the progressive, multitude of pagan gods espoused by the nations surrounding Judah; and the idolatry on the right, that maintains conservative forms of worship while treating God as a force that can be manipulated through prayer and fasting.

Chapter 58 described the kind of fast that pleases God, the putting aside of time and money to feed to poor, shelter the homeless. Good works are not a more positive way to manipulate what we want out of God. The chapter ended with a realignment of desires. Religion is not about asserting our agenda. True religion is submission to right relationship with God, where we acknowledge His desires, His agenda, His glory as central. We want to bring our desires into line with His.

That is true religion. The people of Judah are far from this desired spiritual state. They are after personal well-being; the fulfillment of their own desires; their own agenda, whatever it takes, whether it's pagan idolatry or hypocritical Yahweh worship. In chapter 59:1-13 Isaiah lifts the veil from the sinful human heart. We are all separated from right relationship with God. There is no hope to be found in human society, and so God arms Himself for justice. He girds himself to bring salvation. That's going to be the vision of 59:14-21.

So, we start first with the denunciation of Judah: 59:1-13. We will address this denunciation as accusation, description, and confession.

Accused, guilty, penitent, helpless (59:1-13)

Accusation 59:1-4

Here's the accusation, Isaiah 59:1-4. Isaiah accuses the people directly using the second person plural "you" in the first three verses, and then summarizing in the 4th verse.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ¹ Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short that it cannot save; | Nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. |
| ² But your iniquities have made a separation
And your sins have hidden His face | between you and your God,
from you so that He does not hear. |
| ³ For your hands are defiled with blood
Your lips have spoken falsehood, | And your fingers with iniquity;
Your tongue mutters wickedness. |
| ⁴ No one sues righteously
They trust in confusion and speak lies; | and no one pleads honestly.
They conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity. |

In chapter 58, the people of Judah fast and pray for God's protection and provision. Then they ask, "Why have we fasted and you do not see?" Isaiah gives them the answer, "You fast in hypocrisy." Here is the answer again. Let's be very clear about why you do not experience the goodness of God. Verse 1, it is not because the Lord's hand is too short to save. God can reach you. His power has no

Confession 59:9-13

And in this confession unclean lips are not the only fault of this people. Unclean lips are representative of a corrupted heart. That connection is going to come out in the last phrase. The confession is verses 9-13.

⁹ Therefore justice is far from us, We hope for light, but behold, darkness,	And righteousness does not overtake us; For brightness, but we walk in gloom.
¹⁰ We grope along the wall like blind men, We stumble at midday as in the twilight,	We grope like those who have no eyes; Among those who are vigorous we are like dead men.
¹¹ All of us growl like bears, We hope for justice, but there is none,	And moan sadly like doves; For salvation, but it is far from us.
¹² For our transgressions are multiplied before You, For our transgressions are with us,	And our sins testify against us; And we know our iniquities:
¹³ Transgressing and denying the LORD, Speaking oppression and revolt,	And turning away from our God, Conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words.

Justice, righteousness, and salvation are used as parallel terms in 9a and 11b to create an inclusio.

^{9a} Therefore justice is far from us,	And righteousness does not overtake us;
---	---

that's 9a. 11b,

^{11b} We hope for justice, but there is none,	For salvation, but it is far from us.
--	---------------------------------------

This was the question that followed the hypocritical fasting of chapter 58. They had fasted as a nation that had done righteousness. They expect the blessing of the righteous. But they are not a nation that has done righteousness. Far from it. They say, "We have fasted," and they ask, "Why have you not seen? Why have you not blessed us?" Where is justice? Where is salvation? That lack of blessing is described here, between 9a and 11b. Verset by verset, the people are pictured as a man groping in the darkness. Isaiah's imagery stands out for itself. As I read it again, imagine each verset as a frame-by-frame movement, like a short video clip. Each verset gives you one frame of a video, adding just a little extra information as you go, and there is movement.

We hope for light, but behold, darkness,	For brightness, but we walk in gloom.
¹⁰ We grope along the wall like blind men, We stumble at midday as in the twilight,	We grope like those who have no eyes; Among those who are vigorous we are like dead men.
¹¹ All of us growl like bears,	And moan sadly like doves;

The people cannot find protection from evil. Evil is not punished, it's not stopped. People continue to hurt people. That is true within the society of Judah and it is true outside the society of Judah. They have no protection in their society. They have no protection from other societies. They will oppress and hurt each other, and by others they will be hurt and oppressed. No one will bring about justice. No one will bring about righteous action. No one will bring salvation. And they can do nothing about it. They grope in darkness, they stumble about. Blind to how moral reality works, they can only growl in distrust of fellow man and moan in despair at their own plight.

The language of gloom here takes us back again to chapter 8: those who walked in gloom cursed their king, they cursed their God. Similar to the beginning of chapter 8, the confession of the prophet has given up blaming God and owns responsibility for the failure of society. Blame does not belong to God. The repentant man understands where fault lies. Verses 12-13,

¹² For our transgressions are multiplied before You, For our transgressions are with us,	And our sins testify against us; And we know our iniquities:
¹³ Transgressing and denying the LORD, Speaking oppression and revolt,	And turning away from our God, Conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words.

A person must come to this point before they can move any further. It is the poor in spirit who will be blessed. We are all poor. We just have to realize it. We cannot stand on our own good works, pointing the finger at the corrupt, because we are all corrupt. So this righteous man's prayer for society recognizes his

own failures together with the failures of his society. We are all bankrupt. What can we do? Where does hope come from?

This is how we end the first major section of the Book of the Conqueror. We begin with an ideal vision of the people of God in 56,1-6. It cannot be accomplished by human beings, because we always bring evil with us. Who is going to defeat the evil? Who is going to establish justice?

A divine conqueror comes. We will address this vision of the coming conqueror in three sections. We begin with the state of human affairs. Then we have a vision of divine commitment. And we end with the presence of a Covenant mediator – one who will mediate between God and man.

Divine Commitment to Salvation and Vengeance (59:14-21)

The State of Human Affairs 59:14-15a

The three lines of 59:14-15a sum up the current state of affairs already described in the prophet's confession.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>¹⁴ Justice is turned back,
For truth has stumbled in the street,</p> <p>¹⁵ Yes, truth is lacking;</p> | <p>And righteousness stands far away;
And uprightness cannot enter.
And he who turns himself aside from evil makes himself a prey.</p> |
|--|--|

This is human society. This is the city of man without God. How does God respond to this fallen, broken, evil state of human affairs?

Divine Commitment to Salvation and Vengeance 59:15b-20

He responds with divine commitment to salvation and to vengeance. This is 15b-20.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>Now the LORD saw, and it was displeasing in His sight</p> <p>¹⁶ And He saw that there was no man,</p> <p>Then His own arm brought salvation to Him,</p> <p>¹⁷ He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing</p> <p>¹⁸ According to <i>their</i> deeds, so He will repay,</p> <p>¹⁹ So they will fear from the west
And His glory from the rising of the sun,
For He will come like a rushing stream</p> <p>²⁰ "A Redeemer will come to Zion,
declares the LORD.</p> | <p>that there was no justice.
And was astonished that there was no one to intercede;
And His righteousness upheld Him.
And a helmet of salvation on His head;
And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.
Wrath to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies;
To the coastlands He will make recompense.
the name of the LORD
Which the wind of the LORD drives.
And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,"</p> |
|--|--|

God's astonishment that there is none to intercede cannot mean that God is somehow unaware of the spiritual state of His people. Attributing astonishment to God is a way to picture how clearly a morally good vision sees the absurdity and self-destructiveness of wickedness. The good is always somewhat astonished by evil. And evil just does not get it.

That there is no man to intercede elevates the problem to one of ultimate justice and righteousness. When God asked who would go for Him back in chapter 6, Isaiah said, "Here am I." He became a human intercessor for his people. But he is not enough. When God decided to free His people from Babylon, He raised up Cyrus, a human redeemer. But what human can fully solve the problem of human wickedness and oppression? Who can establish fair and lasting justice? Who can banish evil once and for all? No one.

Just as the need for righteous and lasting government requires an ideal King and the need for righteous atonement requires an ideal Servant, so also the need for impartial, absolute and lasting justice requires an ideal Conqueror.

The Conqueror comes. When will He come? How will He come? On whom will He pour out His wrath? What will be the result?

These are questions Isaiah will develop more in chapters 60-62. We do have one bit of very intriguing information left in the last verse of chapter 59. This is 59:21.

The Promise of a Covenant Mediator 59:21

²¹ “As for Me, this is My covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from now and forever.”

Jewish scholar Robert Alter affirms what you will probably see when you look at the text in your own Bible. This verse is not formatted as poetry. Alter calls it, “a prose epilogue.” Also, if you’re reading in English, that only has one “you” which could be plural or singular, you might not notice that we have just switched to the singular “you.” Unlike the “you” of accusation at the beginning of chapter 58, which was plural, this “you,” all the way through, is singular. “This is my covenant with THEM.” “My Spirit which is upon YOU” - that’s one person. “My words which I put in YOUR mouth.” It’s a singular “you.” “From the mouth of your offspring.” So, who is the “you”? Alter rejects the claim that the “you” is the prophet and the offspring are his “disciples.” He understands the “you” and the “offspring” to be the Jews. He writes this, “Similar formulations in Deuteronomy and elsewhere clearly indicate the spirit of God that will continue to invest the covenanted people for all time, and there is no warrant for the use of ‘seed’ in the sense of ‘disciple’ rather than as a term for biological offspring. ‘Seed’ in precisely this sense repeatedly figures in the covenantal promises to Abraham.”⁹⁰

First, I find it interesting that Alter does not give any space to critical scholarship that this prose verse is a later insertion into Isaiah’s text. That’s what a lot of scholars will say, this verse just doesn’t fit. But Alter knows literature. He is a professor at Stanford, and he is not getting into the Christian view of the text. Still, he finds the verse a fitting epilogue where it is. That’s interesting. Second, I find it interesting that in that quote I just read he does not actually explain the singular “you”, except to say that it is not Isaiah because the verse is clearly using the language of Old Testament Covenant, and “offspring” are not the disciples of Isaiah, because “offspring” in Old Testament Covenant language indicates the biological children of Abraham. And that makes sense.

The term, “seed,” does point to the Abrahamic covenant, particularly the language God used to reaffirm the covenant in Genesis 22:17-18. Speaking to Abraham, God says,

¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

“Seed” in that context, what Abraham would have understood is that “seed” refers to his descendants. New Testament writers can understand the term “seed” with a range of meaning. In Galatians 3:16, Paul understands “seed” as singular, referring to Jesus Christ. He is the promised child, the seed through whom the nations will be blessed. That use of “seed” points even further back to God’s promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15, that her seed would crush the serpent’s head. Paul does not use the word “seed” in Romans 4 when he describes the offspring of Abraham. But he does say that Abraham is both the father of the circumcised and the father of the uncircumcised. He is the father of all who believe. He is not just the father of the biological children. I think it fair to say that Paul could understand a singular use of “seed” as referring to Jesus; plural use of the word “seed” as referring to those who are of the bloodline of Abraham; and a plural use of the word “seed” that refers to all who have become children of God by faith, Jew and Gentile. All those uses of “seed” are fair, depending on the context.

⁹⁰ Alter 1993.

Now, because of Alter I've skipped ahead in our verse to talk about seed. I need to come back to the two more striking aspects of the verse: the reference to covenant, and the singular use of "you". They are connected, so we start with covenant. Isaiah uses the word "covenant" four times in the Book of the Servant. All four uses occur in the confirmation text that comes right after one of the four Servant Songs. Covenant is connected every time to the singular Servant.

So, starting in 42:6, which affirms the first Servant Song, "...I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations."

49:8, affirming the Second Servant song, "...I will keep you for a covenant of the people, to restore the land..."

54:10, affirming the fourth Servant Song, "...My lovingkindness will not be removed from you and my covenant of peace shall not be shaken..."

And 55:3, a second instance affirming the fourth Servant Song, "...I will make an everlasting covenant with you according to the faithful mercies shown to David."

The covenant references connect us back to the Suffering Servant. And something else also does that in this verse. The assertion, "My Spirit is upon you," points us back both to 42:1, "I will put My Spirit upon him." And also back to the Messianic King in 11:2, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him." The Messianic King, who is also the Suffering Servant, he is the singular "you" of this text.

Okay. Listen again to the promise God makes in verse 21, "As for Me, this is My covenant with them," says the LORD. This is a God thing, a God Covenant. "As for me." There was no man. So God took on Himself to act. This is "My covenant with them," says the Lord." He goes on, "My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth." He is speaking to the Messianic King, to the Suffering Servant. There is a singular Covenant mediator, the "you" of this text. And He is the Messianic King. He is the Suffering Servant.

But the promise is not only about Him, but also about His offspring, His seed. And this is not the first time that seed is connected to the Suffering Servant. Chapter 53:10, "He will render himself as a guilt offering, he will see his offspring, he will prolong his days." How does He see His offspring and prolong His days when He is clearly going to die for the sins of humanity? He dies and He lives. His offspring are those who have believed. This promise here in 59:21 also applies to them. Just as the Spirit is upon Him, the Covenant mediator, and the Word of God will not leave His mouth, nor will it leave, "the mouth of His offspring, not even from the mouth of His offspring's offspring," says the LORD, "from now and forever."

God will establish a Covenant of peace. A Covenant that fulfills the covenants to Abraham and to David. He will establish that Covenant through a mediator who is the Messianic King and who is the Suffering Servant. God's Spirit and Word will be on His Covenant mediator. But not only on Him. God's Spirit will be on His offspring – those who believe in Him - and His Word will proceed from their mouths. These offspring are the New Covenant people of God, established on the day of Pentecost as the Church, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the preaching the word of Good News. This is not the last time we are going to see this vision. We are going to come back to it at the very end of chapter 66.

But for now, let's conclude with a final thought on how this final verse is going to transition us from this vision of God as divine warrior, which has come before verse 21, to a light rising in Zion, which is where we began in chapter 60.

Conclusion

So in chapter 59, it is God who puts on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation is on His head. But as New Testament theology makes clear, there is no easy separation between nature and work of God the Father, and the nature and work of God the Son.

So, here we are told, "God saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede." Will there always be "no man?" Will there always be "none to intercede?" No. The ideal

King we saw is both man and God. The ideal Servant is both man and God. The coming Conqueror is both man and God.

The reference to the arm of the Lord most immediately communicates the strength of God. But it is also used as the introduction of the fourth Servant Song, "Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The Suffering Servant is the arm of the Lord. Here in Isaiah 59 it definitely implies God's strength as He takes on Himself the task of abolishing evil and establishing justice. But I cannot escape the echo of the son of God in these verses, especially when we get to verse 21 and the Covenant mediator.

And it's not a stretch to imagine this divine, anointed Conqueror as Jesus Christ. Yes, He is the Lamb. He is also the Lion. The Suffering Servant who died on the cross in the Gospel is also depicted as divine Conqueror in the book of Revelation. Listen to Revelation 19:11-16 and wonder if this is Jesus we are talking about in Isaiah.

¹¹ And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it *is* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. ¹² His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and on His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *on Him* which no one knows except Himself. ¹³ *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white *and* clean, were following Him on white horses. ¹⁵ From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. ¹⁶ And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

At His first coming He arrayed Himself in the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation to do war with the serpent of old. He broke the power of sin at the cross. Satan is defeated. The war is won. And though the outcome may be inevitable, there are still battles to fight before the end. We who are His offspring have been included into a covenant of God's own making. We have been anointed by His Spirit. The word of Good News has been put into our mouth. Following His example, we are to put on the breastplate of righteousness, and the helmet of salvation, and pick up the shield of faith. Doing so, we stand firm against spiritual attack by the Evil One. But our armor is not only defensive. Just as the Lord our God moves forward in action against the forces of evil, the Word of God has been put into our mouths as the sword of the Spirit, to participate with Him in His redemptive mission to set captives free. He has come once. He will come again. We do not wait for Him passively, because He does not wait passively. He is feeding the hungry, healing the sick, restoring the broken hearted, proclaiming the Good News of forgiveness, restoration, and eternal life. He is the coming Conqueror, who defeats evil and restores humanity. We are called to join Him in His mission before He comes again to consummate the eradication of evil for all time, and to establish eternal justice, eternal righteousness, eternal salvation. The end is sure. The coming of the Conqueror makes it so.

Lesson 40 Isaiah 60 The Coming Glory

Introduction

Isaiah <small>"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."</small>					
Book of the Anointed Conqueror 56-66					
The Coming of the Anointed Conqueror 59:14-63:6					
Divine Commitment to Salvation and Vengeance 59:14-20	The Covenant Mediator 59:21	The Coming Glory 60:1-22	Transforming Power, Present and Future 61:1-9	The Commitment of the Anointed One 61:10-62:12	The Day of Vengeance and Victory 63:1-6

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Isaiah 60 begins, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." The glory of God is inseparably connected to the glory of His people: not because God is dependent on His people, but because God chose to make promises. Promises like the one in Genesis 9:11, "I establish my covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood." And the one in Genesis 12:3, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God has staked His fame, His reputation, His glory on the fulfillment of promises made to sinful people.

The vision of God as divine warrior in Isaiah 59 cannot be a vision of God bringing divine wrath on all sinful people. Who would be left? There must be someone left. God made promises to protect and provide for the children of Abraham. God comes as a divine warrior, not only to pour wrath onto the wicked but also to establish a holy and righteous people of His own possession.

But what does a holy, righteous, sinless people look like? Can the ideal of Zion be established on Earth? Can there be a people holy and pleasing to God? How so? When? Is the Kingdom now? Is the Kingdom future? Isaiah 60 explores the relationship between God, the Anointed Conqueror, and His people.

We've not yet considered the structure of this middle section of the Book of the Conqueror. So, let's do that before we get into the text of chapter 60. Our big picture structure of the Book has three sections. Motyer titled the first major section, "The Ideal and the Actual: the needs and the sins of God's People." We ended that section with a description of the depravity of Judah and a prayer of confession by Isaiah on behalf of his generation. "Justice is far from us and righteousness does not overtake us...for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities...speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words."

This actual reality is nowhere near the ideal. Following that section, Motyer titles the middle section of the book, "The Coming of the Anointed Conqueror." Motyer divides this middle section into six parts. We started last week with the vision of the divine warrior who girds himself with righteousness and truth. Motyer calls that first subsection in 59:15b-20, "Divine Commitment to Salvation and Vengeance." God surveys the nations and, seeing that there is no man to intercede for His people, He brings justice Himself.

Motyer separates off the lone verse 59:21 off as the second subsection. That is the odd prose verse we looked at last time that summarizes God's commitment to action by identifying a covenant mediator whose offspring will follow him as one anointed by the Spirit and speaking God's word. So, we have this curious interplay between God girding Himself to bring justice because there is no human intercessor and then the identification of a human intercessor who will establish covenant for God's people.

Motyer titles our third subsection in chapter 60, "the Coming Glory". That's our chapter for this lesson. We are going to see an inseparable link between God's own glory and the glorification of His people. The remaining three subsections are 61:1-9, which gives us another glimpse of the Messianic conqueror, then 61:10-62:12, which describes the commitment of the Messiah to bring God's glory

to His people, and finally 63:1-6, the closing subsection that parallels the opening one with a vision of God as divine warrior.

The text between the opening and closing divine warrior sections weaves together several themes. Oswalt summarizes the many themes under one main idea. These is the idea he believes to be central to the Book of the Conqueror. Quoting Oswalt,

“Isaiah has now moved beyond the issues raised by the exile to address the ultimate concerns of the book: the significance of Israel’s experience with God for all of human history. These issues are implicit in the prophet’s call. If it is true that Israel’s God is the only Holy One, that it is his glory alone that fills the earth, and that he is King of the universe, then what does that mean for Israel both in relation to God and in relation to world? In many ways, the rest of the book is an exploration of those issues, and in chs. 60–62 they come to their broadest expression and resolution.”⁹¹

I find Oswalt’s insight very helpful in putting together the thought that connects the key players of chapters 60-62. What do these have in common? We have God, we have the Anointed One, we have the people of Zion, we have the nations. God does not come as divine warrior simply to wipe out sinfulness on the Earth. That would require another worldwide cleansing like the Flood. God will not wipe out all of human kind again. He made the promise. And He tied the well-being of His people together with His own glory. He promised to bless Abraham and his descendants. God’s name, His glory, His justice is tied up with His own people because He made promises. And that’s what we’re going to see in the center of the Book of the Conqueror. We have the beginning and the ending sections that depict God as divine warrior girding Himself to conquer, and in between those two sections we now have the glory of God intertwined with the glory of His people. Oswalt breaks the pattern of these chapters down into eight themes.

- (1) God will save His people.
- (2) He will give light to them.
- (3) He will share His glory with them.
- (4) The nations will be drawn to what they see of God in Israel.
- (5) The nations will restore Zion’s children to her.
- (6) They will bring their wealth to give to Israel’s God.
- (7) Those who had oppressed Israel will be brought low and she will be exalted over them.
- (8) And Israel will both experience and exemplify the righteousness of God.⁹²

These eight themes don’t occur chronologically. All eight themes are present in chapter 60. But since Isaiah has woven the themes together, it’s difficult to make out one clear structure for the chapter. Motyer sees a ten-part chiasm. I’m going to go with a five-part structure that is loosely chiasmic. At the beginning and end, the themes of light and glory are dominant. In the center, the rebuilding of Zion and the punishment of rebellious nations is dominant. And in the two inner frames, the tribute from the nations is dominant.

The passage opens in 60:1-3 with light and glory.

Isaiah 60:1-22 The Coming Glory

Light and glory (1-3)

- | | |
|--|---|
| ¹ “Arise, shine; for your light has come, | And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. |
| ² “For behold, darkness will cover the earth
But the LORD will rise upon you | And deep darkness the peoples;
And His glory will appear upon you. |
| ³ “Nations will come to your light, | And kings to the brightness of your rising. |

⁹¹ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 535.

⁹² Oswalt 535.

without the Sun, is a dark rock. It has no light of its own. The Moon reflects the light of the Sun. The light of Israel is not her own light. God is the source of light. The light seen by the nations in Israel is the light of God that shines on, transforms, and is reflected through His people. He is the Sun. Israel is the Moon.

In these verses, we have these two ideas. God shines on Israel in such a way that His people are transformed, and the nations see and respond to that transformation by coming to Israel. Our next section develops these two ideas with the idea of tribute from the nations. This is Isaiah 60:4-9.

Tribute from the nations (4-9)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>⁴ “Lift up your eyes round about and see;
Your sons will come from afar,
⁵ “Then you will see and be radiant,
Because the abundance of the sea will be turned
to you,
⁶ “A multitude of camels will cover you,
All those from Sheba will come;
They will bring gold and frankincense,
⁷ “All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered together
to you,
They will go up with acceptance on My altar,
⁸ “Who are these who fly like a cloud
⁹ “Surely the coastlands will wait for Me;
To bring your sons from afar,
For the name of the LORD your God,</p> | <p>They all gather together, they come to you.
And your daughters will be carried in the arms.
And your heart will thrill and rejoice;
The wealth of the nations will come to you.
The young camels of Midian and Ephah;
And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD.
The rams of Nebaioth will minister to you;
And I shall glorify My glorious house.
And like the doves to their lattices?
And the ships of Tarshish <i>will come</i> first,
Their silver and their gold with them,
And for the Holy One of Israel because He has
glorified you.</p> |
|--|--|

Verse 3 speaks of nations and kings coming to Zion. Verse 4 now includes the scattered sons and daughters of Israel returning. In the poetic movement from verse 4 to verse 5, the people of Israel are told to lift their eyes to see the incoming. And when they see, they will be radiant. That’s a description of joy, “your heart will thrill and rejoice.” Why? Because of the abundance pouring in to Israel? Well, yes and no. They thrill and rejoice because scattered Israel and the peoples of the world are now giving homage to the one true God, to Yahweh. Israel does not just rejoice in the riches for the sake of riches. They rejoice in the worship of Yahweh and in their role in that worship. The last phrase of verse 6 makes this point. The peoples will not come in chains forced along in some kind of Roman triumph. They will come freely, “and will bear good news and praises of the Lord.”

Verse 7 says, “They will go up with acceptance on my altar, and I shall glorify my glorious house.” The significance of that first phrase is easy for us to miss: that Gentiles can go into the Temple. Now, we live post-Jesus. The veil has been torn down. But this is something exceptional that Isaiah is saying. These Gentile peoples will bring their tribute to the holy altar of the Temple of God. They will “go up with acceptance.” Not only do they praise God: their praise is fully accepted by God. Verse 8 describes the incoming of these peoples as birds flying in a flock like a cloud and as doves returning to their lattices. The incoming is a homecoming. Scattered Israel and all the nations are like birds returning to their natural roost.

Did you notice that, along with tribute of camels and flocks and silver, that verse 7 also specifically mentions gold and frankincense? Yeah, it’s hard not to think of the wise men who brought gifts to Jesus. I have heard this particular passage referenced to challenge the idea that the men came from Persia because Sheba and Midian are in the south, not the northeast, where Persia is going to be. But that argument misses two points.

First, the nations mentioned here are described coming from all directions, Sheba and Midian to the south; Ephah to the east of the Persian gulf; Kedar and Nebaioth to the east in the Arabian desert; the coastlands to the west; and Tarshish further west in modern day Spain. The “where” of the

tribute is from all points of the compass. The “when” is another question. This is the second point, and we will address the “when” more fully after we have considered the whole chapter. I am going to say that we are looking towards the second coming of Jesus, not the first coming of Jesus. So don’t let the bringing of gold and frankincense throw you off. The bringing of gold and frankincense by Gentile wise men at the birth of Jesus affirms the future fulfillment of this prophecy. Jesus’ first coming is a preliminary establishment of His Kingdom that will reign on Earth, but it is not the completed establishment of a New Heaven and New Earth. That happens after His second coming. So just as the miracles of healing done by Jesus at His first coming pointed ahead to an eventual removal of all illness, all sickness, all sin, all death in the eternal Kingdom, the coming of the wise men with frankincense and gold is an instance of the in-gathering that is going to come from all nations of the globe when Jesus returns as the Anointed Conqueror.

Verse 9a brings us back to the theme of God’s glory shining through Israel as the cause of this worldwide incoming. The nations bring tribute...

For the name of the LORD your God,

And for the Holy One of Israel because He has glorified you.

God’s people are central to God’s agenda, to His mission to redeem peoples from every nation. He is not satisfied to establish justice by wiping out all of humankind – which would be just. It would be good, but He has made promises. He will purify for Himself a people that shine with the light of His glory. The importance of His people - of Zion - is emphasized in the middle of the passage. This is 60:10-14.

Centrality of Zion (10-14)

¹⁰ “Foreigners will build up your walls,
For in My wrath I struck you,

And their kings will minister to you;
And in My favor I have had compassion on you.

¹¹ “Your gates will be open continually;
So that *men* may bring to you the wealth of
the nations,

They will not be closed day or night,
With their kings led in procession.

¹² “For the nation and the kingdom which will not serve you will perish, and the nations will be utterly ruined.

¹³ “The glory of Lebanon will come to you,
To beautify the place of My sanctuary;

The juniper, the box tree and the cypress together,
And I shall make the place of My feet glorious.

¹⁴ “They will come bowing to you,
And all those who despised you will bow themselves
And they will call you the city of the LORD,

at the soles of your feet;
Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

There is a positive response to God, expressed through tribute to Israel. The foreigners building the walls of Zion are not slaves. They contribute voluntarily to the rebuilding. And that is playing on the image of exile. The walls need to be rebuilt for this reason, “For in my wrath I struck you.” One possibility for the “when” of this passage is the return of Israel from the Babylonian exile. But the latter half of the chapter strongly points to a reality beyond the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem. This principle stated in 10a, “for in my wrath I struck you, and in my favor I have had compassion on you,” does fit with the whole idea of the exile. But it also extends past the exile. It can be summed up by Paul in Romans 11, where he describes a giving over to the Jews because they reject Jesus until the time of the Gentiles is complete and the Jews experience an incoming of their own. So that’s another instance of this principle of God’s wrath disciplining His people but then followed by favor on His people. So this passage doesn’t have to be about the Babylonian exile. It has a broader application. And it fits very well with God’s judgment on the Jewish people after the coming of Christ, which is going to be followed by favor.

And this principle that favor will follow wrath is deeply rooted in Old Testament promise. God told Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you. I will curse the one who curses you.” And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. (Genesis 12:3.) That must happen. He also told Abraham, “I will

greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed will possess the gate of their enemies (Genesis 22:17).” That must happen. So far, the vision of chapter 60 has focused on Israel being a blessing and Israel being blessed. They are a blessing because the glory of God is reflected out of them as a witness to peoples who come to praise Yahweh and bring tribute that then blesses Israel.

Not all nations respond that way. There will be those who curse Zion and so are cursed themselves. That point is set in the center of the whole passage and is even written out as prose instead of poetry to give it particular emphasis. It is in verse 21.

For the nation and the kingdom which will not serve you will perish, and the nations will be utterly ruined.

Salvation is within the walls of Zion. These people are not punished for rejecting Israel *per se*. As Jesus said, “they are not rejecting you, they are rejecting me.” They are punished for rejecting the God of Israel. Israel is the light that shines as a witness. In rejecting the truth and goodness of that light, they reject the reflection of God’s nature. This is the unforgivable sin. If you reject the witness of salvation, you cannot be saved. You have made the choice to continue in rebellion. You have chosen the city of man over the city of God; the tower of Babel instead of the Covenant with Abraham. This choice of self-definition and control against submission to God is a choice for evil against good. These peoples that choose to not serve God are going to mock and denigrate the light that shines from the people that God has transformed. But in the end, when God’s patience against wickedness, injustice, and rebellion are over those people who have rejected the light of God are going to be utterly ruined.

I noted at the outset that chapter 60 is arranged chiasmically. We have moved from light and glory, to the tribute of the nations, to the centrality of Zion. Now we move back out from the centrality of Zion to the tribute of the nations, and then to light and glory. The second tribute passage furthers the description of God’s blessing on His people, verses 15-18.

Tribute from the nations (15-18)

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 15 | “Whereas you have been forsaken and hated
I will make you an everlasting pride, | With no one passing through,
A joy from generation to generation. |
| 16 | “You will also suck the milk of nations
Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior | And suck the breast of kings;
And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. |
| 17 | “Instead of bronze I will bring gold,
And instead of wood, bronze,
And I will make peace your administrators | And instead of iron I will bring silver,
And instead of stones, iron.
And righteousness your overseers. |
| 18 | “Violence will not be heard again in your land,
But you will call your walls salvation, | Nor devastation or destruction within your borders;
and your gates praise. |

While I have to admit to being uncomfortable with the image of Israel as a baby sucking the breasts of kings, if I step back from what feels uncomfortable to me, the poetic imagery is classic Isaiah. It’s striking, it’s articulate, and it’s memorable. A mother’s milk is fatty and rich, sustaining food. The baby at a mother’s breast is an intimate image of motherly care that contrasts the initial idea of abandonment in verse 15. Because of her depravity, God forsakes Zion and the majority of Israel. He saves only a remnant in a foreign land. His city and His people have been abandoned. They have experienced God’s hatred in the sense of righteous wrath, of just punishment for sin.

But some great reversal has now lifted Israel from this desolate state into the arms of God. As a favored child, she will become an everlasting pride, a joy to God. She will be cradled and fed in His loving arms. The nations, formerly God’s tool for just wrath, are now God’s instrument of care and blessing. And this experience, this intimate experience of God’s protection and provision is going to affirm Israel in her relationship with God. Verse 16b,

Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

goodness and truth of God. Israel largely rejects Jesus. The nations do not stream towards the light of Zion with praise and tribute to God. Peace and righteousness do not replace government administration. Violence does not cease. God does not dwell physically with His people to replace the light of Sun and Moon, and mourning over sin and death is not eliminated.

So if the “when” is not during the life of Jesus Christ, is the “when” at Pentecost when the Church is born? Well, it is not clear that this prophecy intends for the church to replace Zion. That’s not the language Isaiah uses. While all peoples are welcome, he maintains a distinction between Israel and the peoples of the world. But let’s grant that perspective for the moment and say that we are supposed to interpret this chapter in light of the New Covenant people of God. The Church is Zion. The sons and daughters brought home to Zion are men and women of any race who have become children by faith in Jesus Christ.

Even so, the day of Pentecost gives only a tiny taste of that reality. Representatives of the nations respond, lives are transformed, but God’s presence is not among us visibly as light. Violence has not ceased. And the letters of the New Testament do not show a state of transformation among Christians that suggests righteousness and peace alone are adequate for government administration.

So if this vision has not been realized during the life of Jesus or in the early Church, is this a vision that can be realized by the Church or by a particular expression of the Church at some point in time? Should this be our mission, our agenda to create a society like the one pictured here? Should we be striving to establish a society where there is no violence, where righteousness reigns, where everyone believes?

I would say “yes” and “no,” a little more “no” than “yes.”

This is a vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth. There is no mourning over sin. No need for courts and prisons. Righteousness and peace rule our hearts and behavior. Violence and oppression do not exist. There is complete security. God dwells among His people in physical presence. This is a radically transformed society. Can any community live up to this ideal in our present human reality?

It’s important to note that we have the same problem with Isaiah’s language about Zion as we do when the New Testament speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven. Present reality in some ways echoes a future reality. The Kingdom of Heaven really was present on Earth in a preliminary way when Jesus Christ was here Himself. That was a period of transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. That is when the light of Isaiah 9 rose on Galilee of the Gentiles. That is when the son was born whose government would ever increase. Then He died, He rose, and He ascended into Heaven. Fifty days later the Church was born as a spiritual expression of that Kingdom, but not as a complete, physical manifestation of that Kingdom. His Kingdom is now and not yet. And just as our individual salvation is now and not yet - we wait for the redemption of our bodies so that we might live in a sinless state - we also wait for the redemption of the Earth, so that the Kingdom of Heaven might exist on Earth in a sinless state. The full consummation of Heaven on Earth is future. There must be a radical transformation of individuals and a radical transformation of our physical environment - sin must be completely removed - for mourning to cease, and righteousness to reign, and Jesus to dwell with us. That will come about when the Conqueror returns a second time. Jesus comes as the Anointed Conqueror twice. He conquered death and sin on the cross as the Suffering Servant. He will come again to conquer all continuing forms of resistance, human and spiritual. More about Jesus as Conqueror in chapter 61. back to my “yes and no” answer.

In light of the first coming of Jesus, should we now try to realize this vision of Zion on Earth? Or, if this vision is future, after the second coming, does that let us off the hook? Are we free from any obligation to pursue this reality? My “yes” is that, yes, we should pursue this reality in a way that makes sense for our not-yet-redeemed state. Isaiah meant it when he wrote in 56:1, “preserve justice and do righteousness,” and in 58:7-8, “divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, cover him, then your light will break out like the dawn.” Jesus also meant it when He said, turn the other cheek, love your enemy, forgive as I

have forgiven you, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:16).”

God has begun to transform us in a very real way that enables us to be a light that will attract some to Him, to His glory because of what they see in us. And this future vision of Zion should work to motivate us to be the Moon that reflects the light of the Sun; to live in truth and goodness; to let the image of God in us shine forth, so that people will see His character. This vision does motivate us. This is our future inheritance. This is what will be, so we should embrace it as we can now.

At the same time, it is important to understand that the full realization of this vision is not possible now on Earth. People are sinful. Believers and non-believers both. The utopian dream of a society where there is no government, no police force, no courts, where righteousness and peace reign, that kind of society is not possible. That’s a rejection of the reality of sin nature. If we can imagine a kind of society where all human beings, who are rebellious at heart, believe in God and try to live for God, that kind of society is only accomplishable through strict totalitarian rule. That’s the only way to guarantee that everybody believes, is if we make them. A place where all human beings believe the same thing is a place where no dissent is tolerated, a place where contrary ideas are forbidden. There is only no violence in the streets when there is the threat and practice of extreme violence at the top. In our current reality, righteousness and peace can reign in a society only by name. We can call it righteousness and peace but it’s imposed righteousness, it’s an imposed peace. It’s not an internal state of well-being.

The Puritan settlers of America believed in some sort of New Heaven in the New World. But if they wanted the native Americans to participate in a new Zion, they would have to force them to believe and act according to God’s Word. It would not come naturally just by the light of Puritan life. And even if they closed native Americans outside the walls of a new Zion, they still brought their own sin with them. That is true of the first generation, but it becomes more and more apparent as their children reach adulthood. Some embraced the vision of their parents, but some not. Like-mindedness in any nation is an illusion only mimicked by force.

Communism shares the same problem. The Marxist vision of an inevitable overturn of the capitalist middle class by the working class fails to understand the basics about the sinful human nature. Utopia is not inevitable, quite the reverse. People will go their own way. They will not be motivated to share everything they have. They will want to keep what they have earned. People are not going to give up their vacation home out of the goodness of their own heart. Lenin faced this problem by arguing for an elite ruling class that would bring about the vision of Marx by force. This elite would enforce the ideology. They would make everyone share. And then, theoretically, they would give up their power to the working class at the appropriate time, but that giving up of power has never happened in a Communist society. The people will never be ready for a natural Utopia.

Tom Holland, not Spiderman Tom Holland, but English historian Tom Holland, made this point on a history podcast I enjoy listening to called, “The Rest is History.” Keep in mind as I read the quote that, even though Tom Holland believes Christianity has made a huge impact on human society, neither he nor his co-host Dominic Sandbrook are Christians. Still, they agree on this point. I am quoting Tom Holland from the Communism episode, March 28, 2021. He says,

“I think it is impossible to build Jerusalem on earth. I think Augustine is right that we are fallen, however you want to put it. Humans are not capable of living like that. And it is true of Communists. It’s true of Christians. It’s true of Muslims. Wherever you try and build the ideal state without acknowledging the fact that humans are humans and things are going to go wrong, you end up with disaster.”⁹³

⁹³ Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook. “Communism,” *The Rest Is History* (podcast), March 28, 2021, accessed April 16, 2023. 33:53.

That's from non-Christian historians looking at the history of the world and why utopia will not work. The whole of the Old Testament reveals an inability of God's people to establish a righteous and just kingdom on earth. External law does not make good human beings.

This is why I say "yes" and "no" to the question of whether we should pursue this particular vision of Zion, and I am saying mostly "no."

I would say that our primary aim as Christians is not to establish a new Israel in the sense of a geopolitical nation that enforces belief in Jesus. I would say the fundamental expression of God's Kingdom on Earth is not a political community. It is a spiritual community, a voluntary community. It is the Church, made up of all those who truly believe in Jesus. Our aim should bring about the existence of spiritual communities made up of believers in Christ in every nation on Earth. And we should strive to make an impact in every society, influencing law and government, education and entertainment, caring for the poor and needy, giving witness to the goodness of God. We hold to a closed set of foundational beliefs centered on Jesus Christ. But we do not require others to agree with our beliefs. We respect those disagree with us. We see the image of God in them. We yearn for them to know Jesus. We also understand that people cannot be forced into faith. We want freedom of religion, freedom of speech in our society so that people can investigate beliefs sincerely and honestly. We also want some kind of checks and balances in government because we believe in the depravity of man, and that power corrupts. We want a police force because we do not believe in the natural goodness of man. We can't live as though this vision of Zion is possible until Christ comes back to remove evil, the demonic, sickness, sin within us, and death.

We do seek to be a light, a city on a hill, according to the fallen reality we live in. And we are strengthened by our firm hope in a future reality where sin and evil will be completely removed and the people of God will be fully transformed into the kind of people whose hearts and minds fully recognize and embrace the goodness and truth of God. This is our future, and it gives us great hope.

I'll end with Revelation 21:1-4, a sister passage to Isaiah 60. The two communicate the same reality: our hope for new Jerusalem.

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

Lesson 41 Isaiah 61:1-9 The Favorable Year of the Lord

Introduction

Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me..." (Luke 4:17-18).

Every Sunday morning in countries across the world men and women stand up to read the text of Scripture. The reading of the God's Word usually precedes an interpretation or sermon on the Word. That tradition flows quite naturally from the synagogue practice of Jesus' day. On one particular Sabbath day, Jesus was invited to be the reader. He did not choose the Biblical book he would read from. A synagogue official prepared for Him the scroll of Isaiah. Taking the scroll, Jesus chose which text He would read. He scrolled down to Isaiah 61:1-2, which begins, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor..." Who is this anointed one Isaiah speaks of? Having completed the reading and taken His seat with all eyes fixed on Him, Jesus said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21).

Who is the Anointed One? Jesus is the Anointed One. He is the Messianic Son of Isaiah 9. He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. He is the Anointed Conqueror of Isaiah 61.

We have already seen a tight connection between the Anointed Conqueror and the glory of God's people. The divine warrior and anointed mediator of chapter 59 were followed by a description of a glorious Zion in chapter 60. A similar connection is made in 61:1-9. The Anointed One liberates and transforms Zion. In our study of chapter 60, we recognized an ideal Zion that will not exist until our sin nature is removed and the New Heaven and New Earth are established. So, we might ask of Jesus, "How much of this prophecy was fulfilled on that Sabbath day when you stood to read?"

Jesus may have given some indication on how to answer that question in the way He quoted Isaiah. His quote is not straightforward. He has added something; He has changed something; and He has left something out.

Let's first go through the passage as it is in Isaiah, paying attention to the connection between the Anointed Conqueror and the people he came to liberate. Then we will come back to Luke and see what we can learn from the way Jesus quoted this text. The passage is not long, so I will read the whole together, just pointing out one division in the text as we go.

Isaiah 61:1-9 Transforming Power, Present and Future

We start with 61:1-3. The first-person declaration of the Anointed One to bring liberty to God's people.

¹ The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, To bring good news to the afflicted; To proclaim liberty to captives	Because the LORD has anointed me He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, And freedom to prisoners;
² To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD To comfort all who mourn,	And the day of vengeance of our God;
³ To grant those who mourn in Zion, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, So they will be called oaks of righteousness,	Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.

We then shift in verses 4-9 to a confirmation of the Anointed One's work, describing a transformed people and ending with a first-person affirmation from Yahweh.

⁴ Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, And they will repair the ruined cities,	They will raise up the former devastations; The desolations of many generations.
⁵ Strangers will stand And foreigners will be your farmers	and pasture your flocks, and your vinedressers.
⁶ But you will be called the priests of the LORD; You will eat the wealth of nations,	You will be spoken of as ministers of our God. And in their riches you will boast.

Luke is writing in Greek. So, he had to translate Jesus' words. Mostly he uses the recognized Jewish translation of the Old Testament into Greek called, "the Septuagint." One of the differences between the two Biblical texts is Luke's phrase, "to preach the gospel to the poor," and Isaiah's phrase, "to bring good news to the afflicted." The differences in these two phrases is an example that is probably accounted for by translation. So "good news" and "gospel," those are synonyms; and the word for, "poor," in Greek is a valid option for translating the Hebrew word, "afflicted." So, there is no significant problem with the differences in that phrase.

There are three more significant differences for us to consider. These three differences consist of something changed, something added, and something left out. We'll start with something changed.

Something changed

Luke has the phrase, "recovery of sight to the blind," instead of, "freedom of prisoners." And for us it comes out quite different. Recovery of sight to the blind versus freedom of prisoners – that's not at all the same thing. This is a difference that occurs in the Septuagint that Luke is quoting from. So the change is not really made by Luke. The change is made in the Greek translation that Luke is using. And so, we might wonder how do you get from, "freedom of prisoners," to, "recovery of sight to the blind"? Scholar D. W. Pao believes the Septuagint "may have provided a legitimate rendering of the clause." So he is arguing that the Hebrew text is unclear at this point, and maybe to take whatever metaphor is being used in the Hebrew to take that to mean, "freedom of prisoners," or to take that to mean, "recovery of sight to the blind."⁹⁵ Problem whenever we are translating a text is that, just sometimes, the phrase we are looking at can have two significantly different meanings and the translator has to choose one, and the typical understanding we get from the Hebrew goes one direction, but the translators from Hebrew to Greek went a different direction. I am not equipped to have an opinion on the range of possible interpretations in the original Hebrew. I don't know Hebrew, I can't make a comment. I can say that I am familiar with the difficulty of translation. I can also observe that recovery of sight to the blind is an idea associated with Zion earlier in Isaiah, in the Book of the King. It's also connected in that context with the proclamation of good news and with coming vengeance. So we see this collection of ideas earlier in Isaiah 35:4-6.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ⁴ Say to those with anxious heart,
Behold, your God will come <i>with</i> vengeance; | "Take courage, fear not.
The recompense of God will come, but He will
save you." |
| ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened | and the ears of the deaf be unstopped. |
| ⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer,
For waters will break forth in the wilderness | And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.
And streams in the Arabah. |

So the Septuagint version that Luke is using with the "recover of sight for the blind" finds expression earlier in Isaiah 35. That's linked to Isaiah 61 and, interestingly, Jesus Himself seems to link those two passages together at a different point in His ministry, when He is encouraging John the Baptist that He is, indeed, the Messiah. He's going to say, "The blind see and the deaf hear."

Something added

So that's the first curious difference in the text. A second significant difference has to do with something added. Luke inserts the phrase, "to let the oppressed go free." Again, the phrase certainly fits the context, but it is not the same idea as setting free captives or prisoners. Scholars believe it is an insertion from 58:6 where Isaiah is describing the kind of fasting God desires like this. This is what God desires, "to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free." That last bit is the actual phrase that is inserted into Luke 4:18.

And I think we do not really know did Jesus insert the phrase or did Luke insert the phrase as part of his narration. Luke already seems to have shortened the text read by Jesus, assuming Jesus would

⁹⁵ D. W. Pao and E. J. Schnabel. "Luke" in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 288.

have read more than two verses when He stood up for a Sabbath reading. It is possible that Jesus read more, but Luke just quoted this final part. And if Jesus did read more than two verses, how much more did He read? Could Jesus have read from chapter 58 all the way through chapter 61? And if He did, Did Luke conflate the text to include a phrase from the beginning of His reading with the powerful declaration that occurred just before Jesus sat down, the end of the reading? Or did Jesus conflate the texts Himself as He read to bring in the whole context of the text? Kind of like you find in the Targum. You know, He is reading the text but adding some explanatory words to bring fuller meaning. We cannot answer that question. Whether it was Jesus or Luke, the result is a conflation, that is, a bringing together of 58:6 and 61:1-2 that connects the description of the Anointed One in 61:1-2 with the desire of God for His people in chapter 58.

Okay, so we've looked at a phrase that was changed - the blind see - and something added - the oppressed go free. Now let's look at something that's left out. And what is left out seems to me to be very significant.

Something left out

Actually, there are two things left out. Luke does not have the phrase, "to bind up the broken-hearted." I do not see any great significance with that omission. Luke could have simply reduced the amount of text he chose to quote from Jesus, especially since he added in a phrase, so he dropped out a phrase. Or Jesus could have chosen to drop out a phrase when He added in the phrase. It's not clear.

The second omission does seem to communicate an important truth about the ministry of Jesus. Verse 2 ends in Isaiah with the Anointed Conqueror coming...

To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD And the day of vengeance of our God;

The version Jesus reads omits, "the day of vengeance of our God," stopping with the first phrase only, "to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." When Jesus sits down and says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," the emphasis is on the favorable year, not the day of vengeance.

In fact, the entire passage of 61:1-9, and really this whole middle section from chapters 60-62, focuses on favor to Israel and not on vengeance against God's enemies. That idea is there. The parallel Divine Warrior sections in 59 and 63 do communicate coming wrath. And judgment does find a central place in the glory of Zion poem in chapter 60, where we are assured in verse 12 that the nation and kingdom which will not serve Zion will perish and be utterly ruined.

But that's not giving any kind of lengthy descriptions like we saw back in the Book of the Servant. The lengthy descriptions in 60-62 focus on the liberation and transformation of God's people: glory of Zion. And in these chapters, Jesus chose a quote that emphasizes the proclamation of good news. That good news is good news of liberation from captivity, from blindness, and from oppression, which is then summed up with the phrase, "he has come to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." The idea of favor overlaps the idea of grace. In the Biblical context the two words are synonymous. So we have this emphasis on favor, and on Jesus proclaiming that favor, proclaiming good news, proclaiming liberation, proclaiming grace.

And that's what we have come to expect from Jesus as we read through the Gospels: that He has this ministry of preaching and teaching Good News. It's not what the first-century people of God expected of Jesus. Not if He was truly the Messiah. They have read the prophecies. They connected the coming of the Messiah with a defeat of the wicked and the establishment of a glorious, earthly Zion. You know, the things we've been reading about in chapter 60. Liberation follows a conquest. For good to triumph, evil must be eliminated. Jesus ought to be a warrior and He ought to have political goals – if He is the Messiah.

Jesus understood the confusion of His followers. It's in Luke 7:20 that John the Baptist asks Jesus, "Are you really the One?" John doubts himself. He is not sure that he has understood rightly. He thought he did at the beginning, and he was preaching a ministry of righteousness. But he is looking

at Jesus, and he is in prison. He thinks he knows what the Messiah is supposed to be about. But he is confused by Jesus' lack of religious, military, or political ambition. Jesus is not acting like a messianic king. And so Jesus responds to John by quoting Isaiah 35:5 and 61:1. He sent this message back to John, "Tell him, 'The blind receive sight and the poor have the gospel preached to them.'" Jesus is saying, pay attention to what you have seen and what you do know. I am who you think I am, even if I am carrying out my mission differently than you thought I would.

And this is not because Jesus fails to see Himself as the Anointed Conqueror. Jesus separates His mission as the Messiah into a first coming and a second coming. Later in Luke 21:22 Jesus affirms "days of vengeance" are coming. He also tells His followers in 21:27 that they will see Him return in a very different manner than they were experiencing Him now. In this first coming He came as a baby and grew up a humble carpenter. He came among us as one of us. At His second coming, Jesus says, "They will see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." The later revelation of John the Apostle is going to describe Jesus at His second coming as a divine warrior, as a king, as a judge, as a conqueror.

And this separation by Jesus of His Messianic work into two comings helps us understand the divine figures described by Isaiah. The Book of the King introduced the Messianic son of David. The Messiah will conquer evil and He will establish His reign over a transformed Zion just as we have read here in the Book of the Conqueror. But before that day can come, the Book of the Servant taught us the Messiah must die. He must first suffer and die for the sake of His people. The Messiah is both: the Suffering Servant and the Anointed Conqueror. Jesus is fulfilling the role of the Suffering Servant in His first role. He will fill the role of the Anointed Conqueror when He comes again.

Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled

When Jesus sat down and proclaimed, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," I think He was declaring that the prophetic role of the Messiah has been fulfilled. I think He is referring to the prophecy about prophecy; that Isaiah said a prophet would rise up and he would declare good news. This is the prophetic role of the Messiah. That's what's been fulfilled. Jesus was anointed to preach good news, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. That is what He has been doing among them. That's what He is doing this Sabbath day. He came as the Word to reveal the glory of God and announce God's Kingdom plan.

He fulfilled the prophesy that a prophet would come and prophecy. That does not in any way suggest that Jesus saw Himself as merely a prophet. Some people get thrown off there. Jesus didn't just come to reveal the truth of God. The Messiah is king, priest, and prophet. He is the rare prophet who mediates a New Covenant. Even more uniquely, He is the one prophet who speaks the Word of God as the Word of God Himself. He is one with the Father.

So, He fulfilled the prophetic role announced ahead of time by Isaiah. He is also the subject of His own prophecy. He proclaims the Good News; He brings about the Good News, and He is the Good News. He will conquer sin and death on the cross to release the people of God from captivity to sin, to give His people spiritual sight, to free His people from spiritual oppression. That liberation transforms us now to begin to live for Him now. To live free of sin, to love our neighbor, to care for the poor and outcast. But that transformation has not brought about this glorious vision of Zion that is described here. He is going to come again to fulfill the role of the Anointed Conqueror that we read about in Isaiah 60-62. He is not just going to give us power over sin. He is going to abolish sin. He is going to remove death. He is going to eliminate mourning. He is going to establish Zion. That is a earthly kingdom in which He reigns. He is going to bring us into the blessing of everlasting covenant with God because our sin nature will be removed. We will be able to live forever in the righteous presence of the Holy One of Israel. As Messiah, He first came as Suffering Servant, but He is coming again as Anointed Conqueror.

We are going to get more on Jesus as Divine Warrior in our next lesson, where we're going to finish out this middle section of the last third of Isaiah: the Book of the Anointed Conqueror.

Lesson 42 Isaiah 61:10-63:6 Four Songs of the Conqueror

Introduction

A Fifth Servant Song

As we continue on in Isaiah 61, it is going to be helpful to consider a claim some scholars make about our previous text. This claim will help us consider the relationship between 61:1-9, and our longer text for this lesson starting in 61:10.

Some commentators claim 61:1-3 is a fifth Servant Song.⁹⁶ 61:1-3 is the passage from our last lesson that Jesus applied to himself after He stood and read in the synagogue. And remember, we had four Servant Songs in the Book of the Servant, Isaiah 40-55. These culminated with the famous fourth Song in Isaiah 53. Themes in each of the four Songs appear in 61:1-3. In the first Servant Song Isaiah emphasizes the anointing of the servant; Isaiah 42:1, “I have put my Spirit on him.” In the second and third Servant Songs Isaiah emphasizes ministry of the word; Isaiah 49:2, “He has made my mouth like a sharp sword” and 50:4, “the Lord has given me the tongue of disciples ... to sustain the weary one with a word.” And in the fourth Servant Song the Servant brings healing; Isaiah 53:5, “by his scourging we are healed.” These three themes are all present in 61:1-3. The speaker is anointed with the Holy Spirit; He conducts a ministry of the Word, proclaiming good news; and He heals, restoring sight to the blind.

This song shares common themes with the Servant Songs. This song also shares a common subject, Jesus. The New Testament makes that interpretation for us. Jesus connected Himself to 61:1 with His synagogue declaration in Luke 4:21. Luke later connects Jesus to the Servant in Acts 8:35, when Philip explains Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian Eunuch. So there is good reason to identify this passage as a fifth Servant Song.

But we cannot base that claim only on the similarities. We also have to consider differences between the four Songs that came before, and this Song.

In His quote of 61:2, Jesus intentionally left out the phrase, “day of vengeance.” That makes it easier for us to connect this figure to the Suffering Servant who brings about the favorable year of the Lord through His sacrifice. The omission seems to be an intentional move by Jesus, not to reject the day of vengeance reality, but to separate the day of vengeance from the work he was about during His first coming. When we look at the context of Isaiah, the day of vengeance stands as a significant theme for chapters 59-63. Though the work of liberation is present in 61:1-3, the context around 61:1-3 points further ahead past the initial work of liberation on the cross, to the final work of liberation that removes death and sin completely. The vision of a final, glorious Zion, an ideal society does not come about apart from the action of the Divine Warrior.

I think Motyer has been correct to emphasize the shift from Suffering Servant to Anointed Conqueror in this third book of Isaiah that started in chapter 56. Jesus is the lamb of God who dies to take away our sin. He is also the lion of Judah who completely vanquishes sin and death. He is both. But by overly stating the connection here to the Suffering Servant, we are in danger of omitting the conquering facet of Jesus’ nature: that He is a conquering king who will come to exact vengeance. It is important to notice that, after the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah 53, there is no description of suffering for the divine warrior figure that comes later.

Let’s step back and consider the presence of Jesus in the big picture flow of Isaiah. The birth of Jesus is announced in the Book of the King; the death of Jesus is described in the Book of the Servant; and the reign of Jesus is depicted in the Book of the Conqueror. The first book points towards two separate works of Jesus. The Messiah’s eternal reign over a holy people requires first that He overcome for them the penalty of sin. There must be spiritual redemption. He does that through the

⁹⁶ Tom Constable, *Constable’s Notes: Isaiah 61:1-3*, <https://netbible.org/bible/Isaiah+61>, accessed April 21, 2003.

cross as the Suffering Servant. The Messiah’s eternal reign then requires the complete removal of sin and death as a reality in society. He does that as an anointed conqueror who cast out wickedness.

Our present chapters are focused on this latter work of the Messiah, when He comes to earth again. Instead of naming 61:1-3 as a fifth Servant Song, we do better naming it as a Song of the Anointed Conqueror.

Songs of the Conqueror

Motyer, unsurprisingly, sees structure in these chapters that parallels our structure in the Book of the Servant. As we had four Songs of the Servant, Motyer sees four Songs of the Conqueror. And just as each Servant Song was followed by a confirmation of the Servant’s work, Motyer understands the four Songs of the Conqueror to be followed by confirmation of the Conqueror’s work.

He recognizes the two visions of the Divine Warrior to be the First and Fourth Songs of the Conqueror. The First Song includes both the first vision of the Heavenly Warrior in 59:15-20, and the statement of a Covenant Mediator in 59:21. That song is followed in chapter 60 by a description of glorious Zion. The Second Song is the passage Jesus applied to himself in 61:1-3 and, as we saw in our previous lesson, that Song is also followed by a description of glorious Zion. The Third Song of an Anointed Conqueror comes at the beginning of our present lesson in 61:10-62:7 and, again, will be followed by a description of glorious Zion in 62:8-12. The Fourth and final Song is the second Divine Warrior passage that comes in 63:1-6. That Song is not followed by a description of glorious Zion, though we could take the rest of the book, 63:7-66:24, to include that description. Later we’re going to get the language of the New Heaven and the New Earth. If you would like to see Motyer’s chart of the four Songs, I’ve included it in the “Isaiah Structure Charts” document under “Isaiah Resources” at observetheword.com.

The Coming of the Anointed Conqueror 59:14-63:6					
Divine Commitment to Salvation and Vengeance 59:14-20	The Covenant Mediator 59:21	The Coming Glory 60:1-22	Transforming Power, Present and Future 61:1-9	The Commitment of the Anointed One 61:10-62:12	The Day of Vengeance and Victory 63:1-6
The Four Songs of the Anointed Conqueror					
59:14–60:22		61:1–9		61:10–62:12	63:1–6
Preface: situation (59:14–15a) and reaction (59:15b–20)		An Anointed One Good news at the time of salvation and vengeance (61:1–3)		The work of salvation and righteousness gladly undertaken (61:10–62:7)	The day of vengeance and the year of salvation (63:1–6)
An Anointed One Covenant-mediator (59:21)		Glorious Zion		Glorious Zion	
Glorious Zion		Resident people: the Lord’s priests, the servant nations (61:4–9)		Secure for ever, the peoples gather, the Savior comes (62:8–12)	
The gathering people from all the world, the servant nations (60:1–22)					

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

I do not know whether Motyer is correct to recognize four Anointed Conqueror songs that parallel the four Servant Songs. Whether that was Isaiah’s intention or not is above my pay grade to say, but the observation that there are multiple songs about a single individual in 59-63 is valid, and that observation raises two important questions of interpretation. First, who is the subject of each of the four songs? And second, what is the relationship between the subject of each song and the following description of God’s glorified people?

Considering the identity of the individual in each song, we saw in the first song an interesting tension between Yahweh, who girds Himself to save because there is no man to stand up for Israel, and then the declaration in 59:21 that there is a man who will stand up as a covenant mediator. Then, with the second song in 61:1-3, we have been helped by Jesus who identified Himself as the individual subject of the song.

Concerning the relationship of the speaker to glorified Zion, we have seen in chapters 60 and 61 a direct link between the work of the speaker and a transformed community. That transformed community then reflects the glory of God out for others to see.

We will see a similar pattern in 61:10-62:12 with a third song about an individual speaker followed by a description of glorified Zion. The pattern continues in 63:1-6 with a fourth song about an individual speaker and no following description of Zion.

For this lesson, we are addressing all three these passages: first the third song; then the description of Zion that follows the third song; and finally, the fourth song. We start with the third Song of the Conqueror in Isaiah 61:10-62:7.

Isaiah 61:10-62:12 The Commitment of the Anointed One

The Third Song of the Conqueror 61:10-62:7

¹⁰ I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,	My soul will exult in my God; He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise	And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, To spring up before all the nations.
¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, Until her righteousness goes forth like brightness,	And for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, And her salvation like a torch that is burning.
² The nations will see your righteousness, And you will be called by a new name	And all kings your glory; Which the mouth of the LORD will designate.
³ You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,	And a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
⁴ It will no longer be said to you, "Forsaken," But you will be called, "My delight is in her," For the LORD delights in you,	Nor to your land will it any longer be said, "Desolate"; And your land, "Married"; And to Him your land will be married.
⁵ For as a young man marries a virgin, And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,	So your sons will marry you; So your God will rejoice over you.
⁶ On your walls, O Jerusalem, All day and all night You who remind the LORD,	I have appointed watchmen; they will never keep silent. take no rest for yourselves;
⁷ And give Him no rest	until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

Our first verse sounds like a Psalm. "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God." It is tempting to immediately go into Psalm mode and assume this song applies to us as believers. And it could. I could say this,

¹⁰ I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,	My soul will exult in my God; He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
---	--

That's what happened when you placed your faith in Jesus. He covered you with the robe of His own righteousness. He gave you wedding clothes to wear. But this song is not about us. It is about the one who is speaking. Well, who is speaking?

The 'I' could be Isaiah. In chapter 6, he gave us his vision of Holy God in the first person, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted..." Thinking about whether or not this is Isaiah reminds me of the Ethiopian's question to Philip regarding Isaiah 53. He asked, "Of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else (Acts 8:34)?" It is a reasonable question.

We also have to wonder whether the individual "I" personifies corporate Israel. Though the context will help us discount that possibility. This speaker has been clothed by God with salvation and righteousness in verse 10, which links chiasmatically with 62:10, where he states his goal to bring about

righteousness and salvation in Zion. Zion is not yet righteous, not yet saved. The speaker is righteous. He is clothed with salvation. That distinction is similar to the one we saw at the beginning of chapter 61: the Spirit of the Lord comes on the anointed one so that He might comfort mourning Zion and bring about her transformation. The speaker and Zion are not the same in either song.

Who is the speaker? Jesus identified Himself for us as the speaker in 61:1. And two themes connect this speaker with that speaker. The two both speak the word of God, proclaiming and praising. And the two are both connected to a glorified Zion. This passage makes another interesting connection. The speaker is “clothed with garments of salvation and wrapped with a robe of righteousness.” That sounds like the Divine Warrior in 59:17, who “put on righteousness like a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head; and he put on garments of vengeance for clothing.” This same theme of righteous arraignment is picked up again in the fourth song. 63:1 asks,

¹ Who is this who comes from Edom, This One who is majestic in His apparel, “It is I who speak in righteousness,	With garments of glowing colors from Bozrah, Marching in the greatness of His strength? mighty to save.”
---	--

We have then two interesting connections in the broader context. The speaker intends to bring about the transformation of Zion. He is connected to God’s people. And the speaker dresses in righteousness, connecting him to the vision of Yahweh as warrior.

As a New Covenant believer, I understand both of these interesting connections to be solved in Jesus. He is both one with God and distinct from the Father. He is both the Word who proclaims good news and the arm of God who brings about that good news. And through His work God’s people are transformed. I recognize the speaker in this passage to be co-equal with the speaker in all four Songs of the Conqueror. He is Yahweh and yet, He is distinct from Yahweh. Like the name of the baby born in Isaiah 9, though the present audience of Isaiah may not have been able to understand the mystery of this divine-human connection, the revelation made by Jesus Christ enables us to look back and see how the divine-human connection works in Isaiah. Isaiah’s readers would have interpreted the Divine Warrior in 59 as Yahweh, full-stop, and they would have seen the speaker here as someone distinct from Yahweh. The revelation we have in Jesus Christ enables us to interpret the speaker as both equal to Yahweh and distinct from Yahweh. The speaker is Jesus. In the beginning was the Word. He was God. And he was with God. The Son is equal to the Father and the Son is distinct from the Father.

The language of bridegroom and bride in this passage also stands out to me as a New Covenant believer. We often encounter Jesus described as the bridegroom. In Revelation 19:7 the church is the bride, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to [the Lord], for the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.”

In Isaiah 61:10, the Hebrew parallelism of the verse compares the dress of the speaker to both bridegroom and bride. He is clothed with salvation and righteousness, “as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” His festive garments are salvation and righteousness. Salvation and righteousness, in this context, are not only virtues: they are actions. Or virtues that must lead to action. God as divine warrior has clothed Himself with righteousness as a preface to taking the action necessary to ensure salvation and vengeance. This speaker rejoices in God as he puts on the festive dress of salvation and righteousness, because the festive dress leads to the consummation of his purposes.

He is not dressed just to look good. He dresses with intention to act. We can expect His action to be fruitful; in a sense, inevitable. That’s the metaphor that follows in verse 11.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise	And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, To spring up before all the nations.
---	--

We’ve encountered the garden imagery in the previous passages, both positive and negative. God will turn sour grapes into a fruitful vine, a garden of wickedness into oaks of righteousness. We’ve also considered the efficacy of God’s word. If he speaks it, it will become true. Isaiah 55:11, “My

In the context of Isaiah, when does this happen? In the context of Isaiah, the language of being forsaken makes us think of exile to Babylon, and restoration makes us think of the return from Babylon. Broadening our historical lens to consider Israel's history after the birth of Jesus, we might conclude she was forsaken in 70 AD with the sack of Jerusalem by Rome, and not married again to the land until Jews returned and formed the state of Israel after World War II. But neither of those historical restorations brought about a new kind of glorious people who could live with God forever in a blessed, sinless ideal state in the way Zion has been described in chapters 60 and 61.

Isaiah uses the historical instances of exile and return to point ahead towards a final and absolute restoration. The people of God might rightly be described as the bride of Christ. We are already united to Him. But it is also right to say that the consummation of that marriage has not yet taken place. We are already His: we have begun the process of transformation, but we are not yet completely transformed. We are not established as a glorified, sinless people who can live in unbroken covenant with our King. That's future. This is a picture of glorified people of God in the New Heaven and the New Earth.

This song began in 61:10 like a Psalm of praise, with the speaker exulting in God because of an action God had already taken. God had already clothed the speaker in righteousness and salvation. The speaker was so clothed to bring about salvation and righteousness for God's people represented by God's city Zion: Jerusalem. The song ends in 62:6 and 7 with an exhortation to prayer for the realization of this purpose.

⁶ On your walls, O Jerusalem, All day and all night You who remind the LORD,	I have appointed watchmen; they will never keep silent. take no rest for yourselves;
⁷ And give Him no rest	until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

The speaker has appointed watchmen whose job is to remind Yahweh of His expressed intention to establish Jerusalem as a praise in the Earth. Who are the watchmen? Motyer views the watchmen as prophets given a calling to pray for the fulfillment of God's promises, similar to Simeon and Anna in Luke 2 who had prayed for the coming Messiah and rejoiced to see Jesus presented in the Temple. Oswalt understands the passage as a heavenly court scene. The King emphasizes the seriousness of His intention by appointing members of His court to take no rest in reminding Him of his stated purpose to establish a glorious people. These angels in the heavenly court are instructed to never keep silent, all day and all night. The purpose of the watchmen is not to make sure Yahweh remembers His promise. Their purpose is to show how committed Yahweh is to His people, even though there may be a long delay before the realization of His stated purposes. He has not forgotten His plan to establish a new Zion free from death and sin and mourning. And to emphasize that He has not forgotten, He has appointed watchmen to speak of it all day and all night, every day and every night, until it comes about.

Recognizing the watchmen as angels in the heavenly court scene does not exclude human beings from participating in this prayer. If this is the commanded prayer of Heaven, then believers on Earth model the will of God in Heaven by praying for this coming Kingdom on Earth. The prayer Jesus taught us to pray voices this concern, "Our father who is in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Bring about this reality you have promised, God! We are also the watchers, watching for the royal bridegroom to come again for His bride and to establish her in the land of His own making. We pray for her glory to shine as a testimony to the nations.

This is the end of the Third Song of the Conqueror. And as with the first two Songs of the Conqueror, this third Song is followed by a description of glorious Zion. This description confirms the work already promised in the Song so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it. This is the reality that His work will bring about, Isaiah 62:8-12.

These peoples who have come to Zion recognize the restoration God has accomplished. His people have taken on a new status, a new name, and they see that so:

¹² they will call them, “The holy people,
And you will be called, “Sought out,

The redeemed of the LORD”;
a city not forsaken.”

Four terms are used to describe the new name God has given His people. They are holy. Sin has been decisively dealt with. They are completely pure. As God in the vision in chapter 6 is “holy, holy, holy,” and the people are not. Now the people also are holy and they are set apart for special purpose. They are holy because they are redeemed. Paid for by God. Bought out of slavery. They are redeemed because He sought them out. God desires relationship with His people. He pursues us, even though it is our sin that has caused the separation. They are a city not forsaken. That is our identity prior to God seeking us out: forsaken. But we will not be forsaken because He will seek us out. He will redeem us and He will make us holy.

That is the Third Song of the Conqueror followed by a third description of glorified Zion. The description of Zion confirms the promised work of the Conqueror. We turn now to the Fourth and final Song of the Conqueror in 63:1-6. This song is not followed by an affirming description of glory that transitions us into the final chapters of the Book of the Conqueror.

We are going to experience here a shocking tone shift. We are going to move from the festive wedding analogy of the Third Song to the warrior image of the Fourth Song. The three central chapters of the Book of the Conqueror, chapters 60-62, have overwhelmingly focused on the positive outcome of God’s redemption, but not without allusion to the corollary reality of God’s wrath. We can’t have ideal society without the removal of sin. In Isaiah 60:12, we were told, “those which will not serve you will perish.” In chapter 61:2 we were told, “a day of vengeance comes.” And in 62:10, we were reminded that reward does not come without recompense.

Just as we entered into this middle section of the book with a description of God as warrior, we exit with the arm of God conquering. Justice demands punishment for sin. A good and holy eternity demands the removal of sin. God comes to conquer, Isaiah 63:1-6.

Isaiah 63:1-6 The Day of Vengeance and Victory

¹ Who is this who comes from Edom, This One who is majestic in His apparel, “It is I who speak in righteousness,	With garments of glowing colors from Bozrah, Marching in the greatness of His strength? mighty to save.”
² Why is Your apparel red,	And Your garments like the one who treads in the wine press?
³ “I have trodden the wine trough alone, I also trod them in My anger And their lifeblood is sprinkled on My garments,	And from the peoples there was no man with Me. And trampled them in My wrath; And I stained all My raiment.
⁴ “For the day of vengeance was in My heart,	And My year of redemption has come.
⁵ “I looked, and there was no one to help, So My own arm brought salvation to Me,	And I was astonished and there was no one to uphold; And My wrath upheld Me.
⁶ “I trod down the peoples in My anger And I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.”	And made them drunk in My wrath,

Watchmen have been appointed to stand and pray for the salvation of the Lord. That salvation will be accomplished by the arm of the Lord. And though the text of Isaiah identifies this Divine Warrior in chapter 59 as Yahweh, the text also opens us up to a mysterious presence not fully explained until Jesus and His disciples reveal the mystery of the Kingdom.

The arm of the Lord is His own strength in action. But in chapters 49-53, we came to identify the arm of the Lord with the Suffering Servant, opening us up to the idea here that the arm of the Lord is incarnate as an anointed champion. It is His might, but it is His might expressed in an individual.

The Lord stated in chapter 59 His intention to save because there was no man competent to do so. But that song ended with some kind of tension in 59:21, with the description of an anointed man who would establish covenant. We have reason to think back to the divine-human Messiah in the Book of the King and the divine-human Servant in the Book of the Servant.

Thankfully, Jesus Himself clarifies the right interpretation of these texts. The mysteries of the Trinity and the incarnation are at work here. God is three in one, and God came to Earth. God alone saves. No man can save. God becomes man. And He saves as the Son.

The watchmen see the coming of the Son, not as a Suffering Servant, but as an Anointed Conqueror. It is not right at all to view God the Father as the wrathful judge and God the Son as the compassionate savior, as though their virtues, their character is, somehow, divided. Father and Son share righteous virtue equally. The Son saves in compassion and conquers in anger. Revelation 6:15-17 gives us this image with the jarring idea of the Lamb's wrath.

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; ¹⁶ and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

The watchmen are standing on the ramparts and they see a figure coming from Edom and from Bozrah, the capital of Edom. Edom borders Israel as a perennial enemy to the people of God. To ensure peace and goodness, the enemies of peace and goodness must one day be decisively removed. And it's not just going to be Edom that the Lamb comes to conquer.

Edom provides a concrete representation, or example, of the city of man that will one day fall under the wrath of God – all human society. Edom works well as an example because Edom posed a constant threat to the establishment of God's kingdom Israel. Edom also works well with the poetic image of grapes stomped in wrath. In Hebrew, "Edom" means, "red," and, "Bozrah" means, "vintage."

The Divine Warrior, who we have identified as the divine human conqueror Jesus, comes in majestic apparel. In the Third Song He was dressed for a wedding feast apparel fitting for celebration with the redeemed. In this song He comes dressed for war. And He comes alone.

¹ Who is this who comes from Edom,
This One who is majestic in His apparel,
"It is I who speak in righteousness,
With garments of glowing colors from Bozrah,
Marching in the greatness of His strength?
mighty to save."

The salvation Jesus provides includes the removal of all that is evil. The watchmen ask a question,

² Why is Your apparel red,
And Your garments like the one who treads
in the wine press?

The Anointed Conqueror responds.

³ "I have trodden the wine trough alone,
I also trod them in My anger
And their lifeblood is sprinkled on My garments,
And from the peoples there was no man with Me.
And trampled them in My wrath;
And I stained all My raiment.
⁴ "For the day of vengeance was in My heart,
And My year of redemption has come.

In 61:2 the favorable year and the day of vengeance were two connected realities. Here, the same realities are connected as the day of vengeance and the year of redemption. God will remove sin, either in redemption or in wrath. The Conqueror continues to speak.

⁵ "I looked, and there was no one to help,
So My own arm brought salvation to Me,
And I was astonished and there was no one to uphold;
And My wrath upheld Me.
⁶ "I trod down the peoples in My anger
And made them drunk in My wrath,
And I poured out their lifeblood on the earth."

This is the sobering reality of justice, of holiness, of goodness. The ideal community cannot be established without the removal of rebellion, wickedness, sin. And we have seen historical instances of this through the Biblical story. The Flood. Sodom and Gomorrah. The conquest of Canaan. The deaths of Ananias and Saphira. Ultimately, hell. Hell is the place, or the state of utter separation from God and all that is good. Jesus will eradicate evil from His New Heaven and New Earth: human evil and demonic evil. Individual evil and systemic evil. Jesus did not come to judge when He came as a baby, not because He does not judge. He did not come to judge because the world already stood condemned. There was no need to come to the world to judge it. He came to take that condemnation on Himself, that we who are forsaken would no longer be called, "forsaken." He came to seek us out. He came to give us new names. "My delight is in her." "Married." "The Holy people." "Redeemed of the Lord." He did not come to judge them. He came to provide a way of salvation.

But now, having provided us with a way into the holy city of Zion, having come to provide the means of salvation, the means of becoming holy. He will come again to carry out the sentence of His judgment; the sentence that has stood all along, "the wages of sin is death." The favorable year of the Lord cannot be separated from the day of vengeance.

We are enjoined to pray as watchmen. Pray for His Kingdom to come. Pray for that day when his will is done on Earth as in Heaven; when His will is done with joyful, loving, complete obedience. We are given a future vision. This future vision is not meant to take away our motivation to pursue righteousness on Earth. We pray that His will be done on Earth now. The Kingdom is already here in the hearts and minds of all who bow their knee to Jesus. Yearning for a day when all sin, and evil, and injustice, and prejudice is eliminated, we pursue the elimination of those evils in our societies now. We seek justice on Earth now. God's will on Earth now. At the same time, we know that sin is an ever-present reality in human hearts and human society. We understand that justice will continue to be flawed and imperfect until that day when God comes in wrath to purify the world of all sin. The perfect world of a transformed and sinless people cannot come to be without the removal of all who stand in rebellion against that transformation. Jesus will cast out everyone who refuses to be forgiven, who refuses restoration with their good and holy Creator.

That is not our job. We have been told that human society is a mix of wheat and tares, and we can't always tell, you know, who is of the Kingdom and who is not. Our job is not to eliminate the tares. That would do damage to the wheat. Our job is to obey the will of our Father, to love Him, and to love people, and to invite everybody to the wedding feast of the Lamb while there is time. Yield your rebellion and come to the Lamb. The Lamb came in compassion and laid down His life. The Lamb will come again in wrath. I'll close with Revelation 19:11-16.

¹¹ And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it *is* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. ¹² His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and on His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *on Him* which no one knows except Himself. ¹³ *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white *and* clean, were following Him on white horses. ¹⁵ From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. ¹⁶ And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

Lesson 43 Isaiah 63:7-65:16

Introduction

We have arrived at the last third of the third book of Isaiah, and we're moving from the vision of a glorious future to the messy reality of the present and the human struggle to believe in that glorious Kingdom, to believe there is a way forward through sin and darkness, to believe that God will keep His promises.

Motyer and Oswalt both divide the Book of the Conqueror into three main sections. We have seen how the parallel visions of the Divine Warrior create the boundary markers for those three sections. Motyer includes the two Divine Warrior passages as the beginning and ending of our middle section, while Oswalt views the Divine Warrior passages as the end of the first section and beginning of the third section.

Isaiah		
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."		
The Marks of Servanthood: Divine Character 56-66		
The Ideal and the Actual: The Needs and the Sins of the Lord's People 56:1-59:13	The Coming of the Anointed Conqueror 59:14-63:6	Prayer and Response: Steps to the New Heaven and New Earth 63:7-66:24
		<div style="width: 45%;">The Prayer of a Remembrancer 63:7-64:12</div> <div style="width: 45%;">Sure Promises: the Final Reckoning and the New Jerusalem 65:1-66:24</div>

Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Isaiah		
"He will lift up a standard for the nations...he will set a sign among the peoples."		
The Marks of Servanthood: Divine Character 56-66		
Human Inability 56:1-59:21	The Lord Has Glorified You 60:1-62:12	Divine Ability 63:1-66:24
		<div style="width: 45%;">Israel's Faithlessness; the Lord's Faithfulness 63:1-65:16</div> <div style="width: 45%;">The Final Judgment 65:17-66:24</div>

John Oswalt. *The Book of Isaiah* (Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998).

That's a reminder that, though commentators often see similar structure in Isaiah, the weaving of themes through the text makes it difficult to delineate that structure precisely or with certainty. There is a lot of overlap. There are often multiple ways to organize the text, and we just have to choose one.

Scholars have big-picture agreement that chapters 60-62 should be recognized as a hopeful middle to the Book of the Conqueror. This is the section we have just completed that gives us a repeated vision of God establishing a glorified Zion. As often happens in Biblical literature, that glorious vision is given in the middle of the book, rather than we might do it, we might put it at the very end of the book. So now, in the final third of the Book of the Conqueror, we are returning from that hopeful future to the mess of the present. As we build back towards the climatic end in chapter 66, we are reminded of two tensions: the tension between present mess and future glory, and the tension between the favorable year of the Lord and the coming day of vengeance.

Motyer and Oswalt both divide this final third of the Book of the Conqueror into two sections. Motyer's first section is made up solely of the prayer in 63:7-64:12. Oswalt extends his first section to include the Lord's response to that prayer. I like how Oswalt has kept prayer and response together, so I will go with his structure for this lesson. That means we are going to cover a lot of text, so that we can see the bigger picture of prayer-response, spending time on some but not all of the details.

The presence of a prayer following the middle section creates a parallel with the prayer that came before the middle section. There is this pattern: prayer, Divine Warrior, glorious hope, Divine Warrior, prayer. The first prayer was a straight-out confession. There was no complaint, no supplication, no praise, no thanksgiving, simply a deep, heartfelt admission of sin and hopelessness. And here a bit of that confession, just as a reminder, 59:11-13.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>¹¹ All of us growl like bears,
We hope for justice, but there is none,
¹² For our transgressions are multiplied before You,
For our transgressions are with us,
¹³ Transgressing and denying the LORD,
Speaking oppression and revolt,</p> | <p>And moan sadly like doves;
For salvation, but it is far from us.
And our sins testify against us;
And we know our iniquities:
And turning away from our God,
Conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words.</p> |
|--|--|

Following that prayer, God dressed Himself as a Divine Warrior, clothed in salvation and righteousness, determined to provide for His people what they could not provide for themselves: justice, righteousness, salvation. Chapters 60-62 followed with God's commitment to establishing the ideal society of a glorified Zion. A mysterious conqueror appeared in four songs, each appearance tied to the future vision of God's people. In the third song, he was clothed as though for a wedding, establishing his bride Israel in a new covenant relationship and giving her a new covenant name, "Holy," "Redeemed," "Sought out," and "Not forsaken."

In the fourth song, which is also the second Divine Warrior passage in 63:1-6, the arm of the Lord removed His wedding garments to don a warrior's apparel. He initiated the day of vengeance, stomping like grapes the enemies of His people. The conqueror vanquished sin and evil, securing salvation and righteousness for his glorious bride, who He purifies.

We find ourselves now returning from that future vision to Judah's screwed-up present. This generation is still the generation of lying lips and sinful heart for whom the prophet made confession in chapter 59. This generation is the generation of Manasseh to whom God will say, "enough is enough." This generation is not going to experience the glorious vision, neither will coming future generations for a long time. First comes exile. Israel will fall to Babylon. The people will be forsaken. The land will be made desolate.

Watchers were established at the ramparts after the third Song of the Conquer to remind God of the promised future. Even more, to remind God's people that God keeps that desired future present in His mind even as he takes His people through the darkness of the present.

This prayer now may be understood as a prayer of the watchers. Motyer calls it, "the prayer of the remembrancer," the one appointed to remind the Lord. I like that idea, though with a caveat. I follow Oswalt in interpreting the watchers reminding God as angels in his heavenly court. I do not understand them reminding God with the tone of a lament. But then, I do believe human are joined in to watch and to remind God. We pray too, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." We are looking forward to that glorious vision, and we are enjoining God to bring it about.

The prayer we are getting ready to consider is a very human prayer. It's full of lament over Judah's present and coming future status. Isaiah prays as though the Babylonian exile has happened. The human watcher longs for the glorious hope announced in chapters 60-62, but becomes hopeless in his present reality. The first part of the prayer creates a theological foundation for the request. The second part of the prayer pleads with God in an accusatory lament. God is at fault. After the prayer is completed, Isaiah gives us a response from God. We'll start with the first part of the prayer, the theological foundation for complaint and request. This is Isaiah 63:7-14.

A Prayer of Lament (63:7–65:1)

Remembering the character of God in action for Israel (63:7-14)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>⁷ I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses
of the LORD,
According to all that the LORD has granted us,
Which He has granted them according to His
compassion</p> | <p>the praises of the LORD,
And the great goodness toward the house of Israel,
And according to the abundance of His
lovingkindnesses.</p> |
| <p>⁸ For He said, "Surely, they are My people,
So He became their Savior.</p> | <p>Sons who will not deal falsely."</p> |
| <p>⁹ In all their affliction He was afflicted,
In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them,</p> | <p>And the angel of His presence saved them;
And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.</p> |

- 16 For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us
You, O LORD, are our Father,
17 Why, O LORD, do You cause us to stray from Your ways
Return for the sake of Your servants,
18 Your holy people possessed Your sanctuary for a little while,
19 We have become like those over whom You have never ruled,
- are restrained toward me.
And Israel does not recognize us.
Our Redeemer from of old is Your name.
And harden our heart from fearing You?
the tribes of Your heritage.
Our adversaries have trodden it down.
Like those who were not called by Your name.

The watcher cries to God, "Look from your holy and glorious habitation, look and see! Where are your mighty deeds and compassion?" We've just summarized God's compassionate character and His glorious deeds for Israel from the Exodus on. Why is that all in the past and not breaking in to affect our present?

There is an ironic twist in verse 16. In Isaiah 1:3, after being called, "a rebellious son," Judah is depicted as worse than ox or donkey, not knowing or understanding the Lord. Here it is not Judah who does not understand God, but Abraham and Israel who do not recognize Judah. The prayer readily admits that Judah's sin has marred the family resemblance so much that the forefathers would not recognize this present generation. In spite of that, the watcher relies on Judah's ancient relationship with God, calling Him, "Father," and, "Redeemer;" you're still our Father.

But then in verse 17, the watcher makes a complaint, and this is where it starts to sound like an accusation.

- 17 Why, O LORD, do You cause us to stray from Your ways
Return for the sake of Your servants,
- And harden our heart from fearing You?
the tribes of Your heritage.

That's a bold thing to say to God, "Why do you cause us to stray?" You do not hear any admission of human responsibility there. And yet, even though it does seem unrepentant and accusatory, the complaint makes sense when we survey the Biblical theology of predestination. If God could harden Pharaoh's heart against letting Israel go, might we not wonder that He has been hardening wayward Israel's heart? That even seems to be the message God communicated to Isaiah in 6:10 when he called Isaiah and instructed him to,

Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
Understand with their hearts,

Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
Hear with their ears,
And return and be healed.

The problem is not only that God does sometimes harden a person's heart. The Bible also teaches the necessity of God softening hearts. Jesus declared in John 6:65, "No one can come to me unless it has been granted him by the Father." We've probably all wondered why God has not done more to bring people we love to faith in Him. This complaint from the watcher bubbles up out of a soul anguished by the lostness of the people. "Why have you not softened our hearts O Lord? Why do you harden us in our sin?"

It is in verses 18-19 that we get the context of the prayer. We realize this prayer is the prayer of one who has looked ahead to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon.

- 18 Your holy people possessed Your sanctuary for a little while,
- Our adversaries have trodden it down.

The Temple is gone.

- 19 We have become like those over whom You have never ruled,
- Like those who were not called by Your name.

All your protection has been removed. Following the complaint of verse 17, verse 19 can come across also as an accusation. "It is like you never ruled us, God. Like we were never associated with You or

called by Your name!" I am not sure if the watcher is accusing God for the state of the chosen people. He is describing Judah as utterly forsaken. Which is going to raise the question of whether this Judah can even be saved?

That's the question we get now in the central section of the lament. The one praying questions whether salvation is possible. In English Bibles, this question comes in 64:1-7. In Bibles following the Hebrew numbering, this passage is 63:19b through 64:6.

Here is that passage with its question, is there any hope for the rebellious people?

Can we be saved? (64:1-7)

- ¹ Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, That the mountains might quake at Your presence—
² As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil—
To make Your name known to Your adversaries, That the nations may tremble at Your presence!
³ When You did awesome things which we did not expect, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence.
⁴ For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear,
Nor has the eye seen a God besides You, Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.
⁵ You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, Who remembers You in Your ways.
Behold, You were angry, for we sinned, We continued in them a long time;
And shall we be saved?
⁶ For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷ There is no one who calls on Your name, Who arouses himself to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.

"Oh that you would come down!" Come down to do what? "To make your name known to your adversaries." Come down, Lord, to execute the day of vengeance on all those who have taken up arms against your people! This request is tied up with God's name. It's not, "make your name compassionate to your adversaries," but, "make your name justice known to your adversaries." And the adversaries are not first envisioned as rebellious Judah. That comes at the end. First, they are envisioned as Judah's enemies.

That's the plea. God has acted powerfully for Israel in the past. And not even that distant past. We can just go back to when Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrians. And God sent off Sennacherib. God has acted. God, come! Do something! But verse 5 is the problem.

- ⁵ You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, Who remembers You in Your ways.
Behold, You were angry, for we sinned, We continued in them a long time;
And shall we be saved?

It is true that God meets those who delight in Him, who remember His ways by doing them. And that is how we began the prayer. God sought out faithful sons and daughters. But Israel sinned. And here it's, "We continued in them a long time." So God became her enemy. So now the watcher asks, "Is it even possible that we should be saved?" He describes the state of his generation.

- ⁶ For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷ There is no one who calls on Your name, Who arouses himself to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.

God has handed them over to their sin. Judah has no hope of salvation if God only saves the faithful. Even her righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. No one moves towards God, no one calls on His name, or tries to take hold of Him. And so God has turned away. In their rebellion they turned from God and so, God turned from them. God gives them over into their own iniquities. Judah wants vengeance on God's adversaries, but how is that going to work for Judah if she has become the adversary?

That's part of a lament. But a lament is supposed to move us through that emotion to a new perspective of what it means for God to be good in our situation. The one who laments in faith eventually comes out of his or her grief or despair with a new vision of who God is, a new perspective of what it means for God to be both compassionate and just, loving and holy.

God's response, that we are getting ready to look at, provides that new perspective. He begins by correct the watcher's understanding of His own actions. It is not true that God did great acts in the past and then turned away from Israel when Israel stumbled. God has pursued Israel all along. He also corrects the watcher's wrong assumption that all of Israel is lost. There is a remnant. There is always a remnant. So we are going to take this response according to those two corrections. Correction number 1: God is ready to save. That is in 65:1-7. And correction number 2: God is faithful to His remnant. That's in 8-17. We start with 1-7, God's readiness to save.

God's Response (65:1-16)

God's readiness to save (1-7)

¹ "I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I said, 'Here am I, here am I,'	I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. To a nation which did not call on My name.
² "I have spread out My hands all day long Who walk in the way which is not good,	to a rebellious people, following their own thoughts,
³ A people who continually provoke Me Offering sacrifices in gardens	to My face, and burning incense on bricks;
⁴ Who sit among graves Who eat swine's flesh,	and spend the night in secret places; And the broth of unclean meat is in their pots.
⁵ "Who say, 'Keep to yourself, These are smoke in My nostrils,	do not come near me, for I am holier than you! A fire that burns all the day.
⁶ "Behold, it is written before Me, but I will repay;	I will not keep silent, I will even repay into their bosom,
⁷ Both their own iniquities and the iniquities of their fathers together," "Because they have burned incense on the mountains Therefore I will measure their former work	says the LORD. into their bosom."

It is interesting to me that God does not mention here. He doesn't mention the accusation that He is responsible for hardening the heart of His people. God ignores the issue of His sovereignty in bringing human beings to repentance. I do not know why God does that. I have a guess.

God's sovereignty makes an easy target for us in our despair. We naturally lash out at God when we feel helpless or guilty. God ignores the charge as a parent might ignore hateful words from a hurting child. His silence seems to communicate, "I am sovereign, but that is not the problem here. Let's not get caught up in why I do what I do. Leave that to me. I will tell you what you have done, and I want you to focus on your part in the problem."

What God does here first is that God rejects the charge He has hidden from His people. Quite to the contrary, God is the one in pursuit. "I permitted myself to be found by those who did not seek me." "I have spread out my hands all day long to a rebellious people."

Second, God rejects the charge of silence. The truth is, it might go better for us if God did remain silent, because when He speaks, He is going to announce the verdict of His holy justice. "I will not keep silent, but I will repay." God's silence has not reflected a lack of compassion. Rather, God's silence is compassion, a slowness to be angry in our rebellion.

And, of course, God has not been silent. That's why He called Isaiah. And this entire prophecy is God's willingness to speak truth to this generation. Speaking now, God promises to repay both the iniquities of the current generation and the iniquities of their fathers. And that is in keeping with His

Exodus 34:6-7 name, the name the watcher brought up in the first verses of his prayer. Exodus 34:7 states,

[I am the Lord your God] who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.

God, who is slow to anger, will at some point call a society to account, both for their sins and the sins of their fathers. That does not mean that the children pay for the sins of their fathers. The children pay for their own sins. The fathers pay for their sins. It does mean that the consequences of sin build up in a society, having effect from one generation to the next. And God will address that.

The charge here is rebellion, the charge brought up in the prayer. The emphasis is on spiritual rebellion specifically. The people are described as those who provoke God to His face,

Offering sacrifices in gardens	and burning incense on bricks;
⁴ Who sit among graves	and spend the night in secret places;
Who eat swine's flesh,	And the broth of unclean meat is in their pots.
⁵ "Who say, 'Keep to yourself,	do not come near me, for I am holier than you!'
These are smoke in My nostrils,	A fire that burns all the day.

The people have committed spiritual adultery, turning away from and rejecting God. That is the state of their rebellion. No one can argue the injustice of their position. The spurning of God's long pursuit of them has finally resulted in this just, overdue verdict.

I will measure their former work into their bosom.

Now, It sounds as though all members of society will experience the wrathful judgment of God. That's the way the watcher prayed as though the calamity fallen on Judah signaled condemnation of the whole. And that's why it's natural to lament, to grief. We don't make fine distinctions. Our emotion causes us to speak in absolutes. "Everything is terrible!" "You hate us!" "No one can be saved!" God corrects that perspective. There is a remnant of faithful servants and God is going to be faithful to them. We end with verses 8-16.

God's faithfulness to the remnant (8-16)

⁸ Thus says the LORD,	
"As the new wine is found in the cluster,	And one says, 'Do not destroy it,
	for there is benefit in it,'
So I will act on behalf of My servants	In order not to destroy all of them.
⁹ "I will bring forth offspring from Jacob,	And an heir of My mountains from Judah;
Even My chosen ones shall inherit it,	And My servants will dwell there.
¹⁰ "Sharon will be a pasture land for flocks,	And the valley of Achor a resting place for herds,
	For My people who seek Me.
¹¹ "But you who forsake the LORD,	Who forget My holy mountain,
Who set a table for Fortune,	And who fill cups with mixed wine for Destiny,
¹² I will destine you for the sword,	And all of you will bow down to the slaughter.
Because I called, but you did not answer;	I spoke, but you did not hear.
And you did evil in My sight	And chose that in which I did not delight."
¹³ Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD,	
"Behold, My servants will eat,	but you will be hungry.
Behold, My servants will drink,	but you will be thirsty.
Behold, My servants will rejoice,	but you will be put to shame.
¹⁴ "Behold, My servants will shout joyfully	with a glad heart,
But you will cry out with a heavy heart,	And you will wail with a broken spirit.
¹⁵ "You will leave your name for a curse	And the Lord GOD will slay you.
to My chosen ones,	

But My servants will be called by another name.

Lesson 44 Isaiah 65:17-66:17 New Heavens and New Earth

Introduction

- ¹⁷ “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
And the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.
¹⁸ “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create;

Wow! Imagine that – evil, brokenness, calamity, injustice swept away in the recreation of a New Earth with New Heavens above. All of our sin and weakness; all of our guilt and shame remembered no more nor even lurking in our mind. The people of God set free for gladness and joy in a new creation.

I commented in a previous lesson that the climax of the Book of the Conqueror comes in the middle, but reading this I am not so sure. Does the climax come in the middle when the Conqueror dresses himself to bring righteousness and salvation, the righteousness of the wedding and the salvation of vengeance, establishing the promised, glorious Zion? Is that the climax? Or does the climax come now in the last two chapters with the proclamation of a New Heaven and a New Earth and a sign established among the nations? Well, the beauty of a chiasmic structure is that we do not have to decide. Chiasm can give emphasis to the beginning, to the middle, and to the end all at the same time.

Oswalt understands this declaration in 65:17, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth,” to connect all the way back to the first verse of the Book of the Conqueror in 56:1. ¹⁰¹ “Preserve justice and do righteousness for my salvation is about to come and my righteousness to be revealed.” God’s righteousness is going to be revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ: a revelation that comes in stages. First, Jesus comes as the Suffering Servant and enables our union with Him. That is a manifestation of God’s saving righteousness that enables new creation in the believer. The Book of Revelation later speaks of a thousand-year reign. Maybe this passage speaks to that reign. That is the beginning of a new kind of kingdom on Earth. But the fulfillment of God’s righteous promises cannot come to be until this present order of creation itself is redeemed through a re-creation of heavens and Earth.

So we are a people looking ahead to the culmination of God’s promises, but we do not sit and do nothing while we wait. We are invited to participate in the unfolding reality of God’s Kingdom, from stage to stage. The beginning of the Book of the Conqueror exhorts us to “Preserve justice and do righteousness...” now because of what will be. Preserve justice and do righteousness,

- ¹⁷ “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
And the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.
¹⁸ “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create;

We want our actions in the present to be a confirmation of a participation in what will be. The unfolding of God’s kingdom involves some complexity. The watcher’s lamentation over the destruction of God’s people raises the question, “Who really are God’s people? Who is going to be glad and rejoice forever?” Are the people of Israel God’s chosen Kingdom or not? The answer, “Yes and no.” That’s the answer Isaiah gives, and that’s what we see in Paul’s development of this very question in Romans 9-11. Who are God’s people? Paul is going to draw on the potter metaphor in Isaiah 64,8 to argue the justice of God’s wrath against the Jews and God’s mercy towards Gentiles. That’s in Romans 9. In Romans 10, Paul picks up God’s response to the watcher in Isaiah 65:2, “I have spread out my hands all day long to a rebellious people.” God has not refused Israel. Israel has refused God. Does that mean Israel is now totally out of the picture? No. Paul’s argument in Romans 11 follows the two stages of Isaiah’s thought. First, Israel is never completely rejected. There is a remnant of Jews who believe and believing are included among God’s people. Second, Israel as an entity, maybe as a majority, will be included back in after the time of the Gentiles has come to an

¹⁰¹ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 655.

end. Those two ideas are consistent in Isaiah. Not all Israel is saved, the remnant is saved. And Israel will exist as a distinct entity at the end of things and be included together with Gentiles as God's people.

Israel has been chosen out for a special role in salvation history. That does not mean Israel and God's Kingdom are equivalent. There is a close connection under the Old Covenant between the spiritual people of God and the geo-political nation of Israel. Even then the two are not the same. Israel will be destroyed and exiled. Many Jews will be regarded as enemies to God. And yet, a remnant has always been and always will be. These are God's people in the spiritual sense, God's Kingdom in a spiritual sense. This kind of kingdom becomes even more prevalent under the New Covenant when identification with any one geopolitical nation is completely removed and the locus of what it means to be the people of God becomes spiritual faith in Jesus Christ. The people of God are those who have believed in Jesus.

So in Isaiah's time there is some complexity between ethnic Israel, geopolitical Israel, and spiritual Israel. As we're coming into the climactic end of Isaiah, we can see these four truths.

First, the rebellious children of Israel will be treated as enemies of God, separated from Him.

Second, those who remain true to God will continue to be included in covenant relationship with Him.

Third, Gentiles will also be included into covenant relationship with Yahweh.

Fourth, Israel will play an important role in the culmination of God's work when He recreates Heavens and Earth.

These intertwined truths are organized by Isaiah into a chiastic pattern in his last two chapters. The whole Book of the Conqueror has been chiastic. It is also helpful to recognize this chiasm within that chiasm, because recognizing the pattern helps us to understand Isaiah's move from remnant to rebellious and back again, kind of, multiple times.

In our last lesson, I went with Oswalt's structure of prayer and response, so that's more just recognizing the linear connection between the watcher's lament and God's response to that lament. So we just covered response as 65:1-16.

Motyer is the one who recognizes the more complex chiastic structure.¹⁰² According to his view, God's response covers almost all of chapters 65 and 66 in a nine-part chiasm that highlights the tension between remnant and rebellious, God's blessing and God's judgment.

The response section in our last lesson just took us half of that chiasm. I'm going to explain to you now the parallel pairs Motyer has identified, and going through the pairs will do two things for us. It will provide a review of the response material from our last lesson while at the same time giving us a forecast of the parallel second half of that response, that we're going to cover in this lesson.

¹⁰² J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 522-23.

- A The Lord's call to those who had not previously sought or known him (65:1)
- B The Lord's requital on those who have rebelled and followed cults (2-7)
 - C A preserved remnant, his servants, who will inherit his land (8-10)
 - D Those who forsake the Lord and follow cults are destined for slaughter because he called and they did not answer but chose what did not please him (11-12)
 - E Joys for the Lord's servants in the new creation. The new Jerusalem and its people (13-25)
 - D' Those who have chosen their own way and their improper worship. They are under judgment because the Lord called and they did not answer but chose what did not please him (66:1-4)
- C' The glorious future of those who tremble at the Lord's word, the miracle children of Zion, the Lord's servants (5-14)
- B' Judgment on those who follow cults (15-17)
- A' The Lord's call to those who have not previously heard (18-21)

God's longer response to the watcher's lament begins and ends with an invitation from God to a people who do not know Him. In A, 65:1, that invitation was to a rebellious Israel. In A' 66:18-21, the invitation is going to be to Gentile peoples in far off countries.

In B and B', 65:2-7 and 66:15-17, God declares judgment on those who embrace paganism. Both passages mention sacred gardens and eating swine's flesh. C and C', 65:8-10 and 66:5-14, give attention to the remnant. The faithful are described in both sections as servants. D and D', 65:11-12 and 66:1-4, repeats the judgment on those who turn to false religion, emphasizing their refusal to answer when God called. These specific words in D are repeated in D', "I spoke, but they did not listen and they did evil in my sight and chose that in which I did not delight." Finally, the center section E describes the joy God's servants will experience in the new creation He is going to make.

Since we are starting already halfway through, the joy of that center point E is where we begin in this lesson. From there we move to judgment, acceptance, and back again to judgment. If we were doing the whole chiasm, the pattern would be judgment – acceptance; judgment – joy; judgment - acceptance - judgment.

All that back and forth from those rejected to those accepted makes much better sense when we understand that these two chapters are organized according to the parallelism of a chiastic structure. And Isaiah's use of this kind of structure maintains the tension present in the question, "Who really are the people of God? To whom do the promises of righteousness and salvation apply? Is it all of Israel?" No. It's a remnant.

So having come half way through, we start with the center of the chiastic response to the lament and then we're going to move back out. I am going to address E, then D', then C', then B', and I'm going to leave A' for next lesson, which is also our final lesson for Isaiah. We start this lesson in the promise of the middle of the chiasm. This is E, "Joy in the New Creation," Isaiah 65:17-25.

E Joy in the New Creation (65:17-25)

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 17 | "For behold, I create new heavens
And the former things will not be remembered | and a new earth;
or come to mind. |
| 18 | "But be glad and rejoice forever
For behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing | in what I create;
And her people for gladness. |
| 19 | "I will also rejoice in Jerusalem
And there will no longer be heard in her | and be glad in My people;
The voice of weeping and the sound of crying. |
| 20 | "No longer will there be in it an infant who lives
but a few days,
For the youth will die at the age of one hundred | Or an old man who does not live out
his days;
And the [sinner] ¹⁰³ who does not reach the age of
one hundred |
| | | Will be thought accursed. |
| 21 | "They will build houses and inhabit them; | They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit. |
| 22 | "They will not build and another inhabit,
For as the lifetime of a tree, so will be the days
of My people, | They will not plant and another eat;
And My chosen ones will wear out the work
of their hands. |
| 23 | "They will not labor in vain,
For they are the offspring of those blessed by the LORD, | Or bear children for calamity;
And their descendants with them. |
| 24 | "It will also come to pass that before they call,
I will answer; | and while they are still speaking, I will hear. |
| 25 | "The wolf and the lamb will graze together,
and dust will be the serpent's food.
They will do no evil or harm | and the lion will eat straw like the ox;
in all My holy mountain," says the LORD. |

¹⁰³ NASB has "and the one who does not..." but includes a note that "the one" is literally "one who misses the mark." It is better to either include that literal phrase or to use "sinner" which is the translation of the phrase.

²⁰ “No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, Or an old man who does not live out his days;

Those two versets tell us of something that will not be. The next line is the greater problem.

For the youth will die at the age of one hundred And the [sinner] who does not reach the age of one hundred
Will be thought accursed.

The question is whether this is a real experience of the New Heavens and New Earth, whatever that is, or is this a hypothetical. If it is a hypothetical point we might translate the first verset this way, “If one dies at the age of one hundred he will be considered a youth.” The next verset intensifies the hypothetical, “And the one who does not even reach the age of one hundred (question mark)?” What will be thought of him? The third and final verset answers, “[He] will be thought accursed.”

As a hypothetical, the emphasis of the verse would not be that there is certainly going to be death, but would be: how odd, how out of place would death be in the New Heavens and the New Earth? How strange and unexplainable if anyone should live to only one hundred or should die before reaching one hundred. If someone were to die at such a young age, they would certainly be thought accursed. That’s a reference to the curse that came at the fall of Adam and Eve. To die at any point, even after a long life, reveals the presence of corruption. The curse has not yet been undone if somebody could die, even if they die at a hundred. But will that ever happen? Can it happen if the Heavens and Earth have truly been remade?

If we read this as a hypothetical of the new creation, then no, it cannot actually happen. It’s emphasizing the wrongness of it. Were it to happen, we would conclude the curse of sin is still present. There is reason to mourn. But we have been told there never again will be mourning. I recognize this is problematic. Certain passages have problems. And we have to choose, one way or the other, this sounds more than just Israel coming back after the exile, but then it somehow sounds less than the New Heavens and New Earth. And so we’re struggling with the poetry to decide which one to go with. Isaiah 25:6-8 gives support outside of this passage for taking verse 21 as a hypothetical. In this previous vision of the New Jerusalem death is completely removed. So this is 25:6-8,

⁶ And the LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, *and* refined, aged wine. ⁷ And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations. ⁸ He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken.

Jumping way ahead to Revelation, Revelation’s climatic declaration of recreation brings together this passage in Isaiah 25 and our present passage in Isaiah 65. Listen to the language in Revelation 21:1-4.

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”

A New Heaven and New Earth, no more death, no more mourning, every tear wiped away. That’s the language of Isaiah. I take the context around verse 21 along with this previous passage of Isaiah 25 together with the future passage of Revelation 21 as solid ground for interpreting that one problem verse about death as a hypothetical emphasis that is, really, pointing out the strangeness of curse in the New Heavens and New Earth. In reality, it won’t be there.

If that is correct, there is no compelling reason to take verses 22-24 as the rebuilding of Jerusalem after exile in Babylon. The rest of the passage celebrates a new society, a new experience of well-being in this new creation.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>²¹ “They will build houses and inhabit them;
²² “They will not build and another inhabit,
For as the lifetime of a tree, so will be the days
of My people,
²³ “They will not labor in vain,
For they are the offspring of those blessed by the LORD,</p> | <p>They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They will not plant and another eat;
And My chosen ones will wear out the work
of their hands.
Or bear children for calamity;
And their descendants with them.</p> |
|--|---|

If this is the glorious Zion described in 60-62, the effect is the opposite of hyperbole. Instead of an expansive description of present reality, this is a prosaic description of eternal reality. The language paints a picture of shalom, or well-being, in terms that connect with the hearts and souls of the present audience. Imagine building and planting without any fear of raiders or strong armies coming and stealing that away. There are olive trees in Israel two and three thousand years old. Imagine death so far out of your mind as a healthy, fruitful, long-lived tree that is practically eternal. There are stone streets in the Promised Land worn by Roman era ox-carts. So imagine the sense of stability communicated by the phrase, “My chosen ones will wear out the work of their hands.” They will be the ones in this land when these solid, stone works are finally worn out. In the uncertainty of the Middle East where even the empires of Assyria and Babylon eventually fall, smaller nations like Israel and Judah faced an ever present threat of invasion and destruction. The peace and stability God provides removes that mental and emotional worry. You will not labor in vain. Your children will not experience calamity.

Will there be offspring and descendants in the Heavenly Kingdom? I don’t know. Here the sense is of longevity, legacy, blessing on those you love. Its not easy to know which details of far future poetic prophecy are literal descriptions, and which details paint a picture of that experience by using terms of our present existence. This passage removes vulnerability, it removes fear; it gives purpose, and hope, and stability.

Who experiences this wonderfully stable, and fruitful, and peaceful life? The chosen ones. Well, who are the chosen one? Israel would embrace that title for herself. And in a sense, that is right. The ethnic people, the Jews, are chosen. They are chosen for a special role in the history of salvation. But they are not all chosen for salvation. Some, the potter has made for noble purpose and some for ignoble. Only the remnant is chosen for peace in the New Heavens and New Earth. We move now from the center of the chiasmic response to the beginning of the second half. D’ affirms again the need to differentiate between the faithful remnant and those who are rebellious, those who turn their backs on God. There will be judgment on those who ignore His voice. This is 66:1-4.

D’ Judgement on those who did not answer when God called (66:1-4)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>¹ Thus says the LORD,
“Heaven is My throne
Where then is a house you could build for Me?
² “For My hand made all these things,

“But to this one I will look, to him who is humble
³ “But he who kills an ox is like one who slays a man;
He who offers a grain offering is like one who offers
swine’s blood;
As they have chosen their own ways,
⁴ So I will choose their punishments
Because I called, but no one answered;
And they did evil in My sight</p> | <p>and the earth is My footstool.
And where is a place that I may rest?
Thus all these things came into being,”
declares the LORD.
and contrite of spirit, who trembles at My word.
He who sacrifices a lamb is like the one who
breaks a dog’s neck;
He who burns incense is like the one who blesses
an idol.
And their soul delights in their abominations,
And will bring on them what they dread.
I spoke, but they did not listen.
And chose that in which I did not delight.”</p> |
|---|--|

Following the declaration of recreation, God reminds us that His existence dwarfs the physical world. The reminder particularly targets the ancient Near Eastern tendency to see God as a localized deity tied to the Temple in Jerusalem. God has made Himself imminent to a specific people. The watcher remembered God as the One who put His Holy Spirit in the midst of them. God broke into space and time to make Himself known in experience. The Jewish tendency was to then identify God according to His localized presence among them, in their Temple in their city, in Jerusalem.

Isaiah's vision in chapter 6 has already countered the temptation to overemphasize God's imminence by reminding us of His transcendence. He is holy, holy, holy, the whole Earth is full of His glory. That's the emphasis we're getting here in 61:1-2a.

- ¹ Thus says the LORD,
"Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool.
Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?
² "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being,"
declares the LORD.

God is not specifically tied to one part of His physical creation. Nor is He specifically tied to the whole of creation. He is separate from and greater than the physical universe. Still, it would be another mistake to assume that He is so transcendent that He cannot be bothered with human affairs, that He doesn't see us. He does see us. And in verse 2b He tells us what kind of person He looks to with approval.

"But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, who trembles at My word. I love this line. This is the one God blesses. Not the one who is rich in righteousness, but the one who is poor in spirit. God knows His chosen ones cannot live up to His standard of holiness. No one can keep covenant with Him. We all fail. That's a guarantee.

So, God made a way that we might be accepted, even though we sin. The Suffering Servant dies to pay the penalty of our sin. We no longer live under a standard of perfect holiness. So, if God does not expect us to live up to the standard of His holiness, what does God expect of us? He expects humility and a contrite spirit. He expects us to preserve justice and do righteousness. He expects us to tremble at His word. That word, "tremble," leaps out to me. I do not think of it as a shaking deer frozen by the beams of a car's headlights. The word, "tremble," is connected to the fear of the Lord. To tremble at God's word is to recognize the seriousness of God, the seriousness of human life, the seriousness of our sin, the seriousness of good and evil. To tremble at His word is to be attentive to these realities because our lives are at stake; the well-being of our loved ones is at stake; goodness, and justice, and holiness are at stake.

Trembling is the opposite of apathy. To say, "I will live how I want. God forgives. That's His job.", is to show that you have no real experience of God. God reveals Himself to those who take His word seriously and soberly, who tremble, who humbly bow down, who come with a contrite spirit. The sinful human heart understands grace as freedom to sin, because the sinful human heart has never really seen God or even really understood themselves. The repentant human heart understands grace as freedom from sin, freedom from corruption into the goodness that is God.

The majority in Isaiah's Judah make light of God's law. Unfortunately, that can be said of a large swath of the Christian church as well. Many go through the motions of religious ritual without any serious intention of pursuing the vision of righteousness God communicates to us through His Word. These are the ones Isaiah calls out in verse 3. They sacrifice according to Biblical requirement, but they do not "preserve justice and do righteousness" in their communities. God sees through their ritual obedience to the reality of who they are morally.

- ³ "But he who kills an ox is like one who slays a man; He who sacrifices a lamb is like the one who breaks a dog's neck;
He who offers a grain offering is like one who offers swine's blood; He who burns incense is like the one who blesses an idol.
As they have chosen their own ways, And their soul delights in their abominations,

It was God's idea to sacrifice an ox, to sacrifice a lamb, to offer grain, to burn incense. That's all good ritual, or potentially good ritual. But what twists it up is the very last line, "they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations." So all these ritual that have potential goodness are detestable. They are like slaying a man, or breaking a dog's neck, or offering swine's blood. Blessing an idol. The lack of moral vision or obedience ruins the ritual.

Seeing past their ritual through to the heart, God gives this verdict in verse 4.

4	So I will choose their punishments Because I called, but no one answered; And they did evil in My sight	And will bring on them what they dread. I spoke, but they did not listen. And chose that in which I did not delight."
---	---	---

This is a sobering image. Here are people who are actively going to Temple, actively going to church, actively going through the motions. They would say, "Yeah, we are doing exactly what you want us to do, God!" And God says, "You're not even listening to me! You are completely ignoring me as you go to church." The watcher had lamented God's judgment of His chosen people and accused God of remaining silent, failing to bring His wayward people back. God answered that charge in the first half of this chiasmic structure. Here we get the answer again. Human beings bear responsibility for their own choices, regardless of how God's sovereignty may or may not come into play. God called. They did not answer. God spoke. They did not listen. What did they do? They did evil in God's sight. They chose that in which God does not delight. They did not tremble at His words. They will tremble at the dreadful consequences of their own rebellion.

God sees. In verse 2 He looked to the humble and contrite. In verse 4 He looks to the evil of those who actively choose that in which He does not delight.

This section ends with those God has seen and condemned. We turn back in the next section to those God has seen and accepted. This is C', the glorious future of the Lord's servants, Isaiah 66:5-14.

C' The glorious future of the Lord's servants (66:5-14)

5	Hear the word of the LORD, "Your brothers who hate you have said, 'Let the LORD be glorified,	you who tremble at His word: who exclude you for My name's sake, that we may see your joy.'
		But they will be put to shame.
6	"A voice of uproar from the city, The voice of the LORD	a voice from the temple, who is rendering recompense to His enemies.
7	"Before she travailed, she brought forth; she gave birth to a boy.	Before her pain came,
8	"Who has heard such a thing? Can a land be born in one day? As soon as Zion travailed,	Who has seen such things? Can a nation be brought forth all at once? she also brought forth her sons.
9	"Shall I bring to the point of birth and not give delivery?" "Or shall I who gives delivery shut the womb?"	says the LORD.
10	"Be joyful with Jerusalem Be exceedingly glad with her,	says your God. and rejoice for her, all you who love her; all you who mourn over her,
11	That you may nurse and be satisfied That you may suck and be delighted	with her comforting breasts, with her bountiful bosom."
12	For thus says the LORD, "Behold, I extend to her And like an overflowing stream, And you will be nursed, you will be carried on the hip	peace like a river, the glory of the nations; and dandled on the knees.
13	"As one whom his mother comforts, And you will be comforted in Jerusalem."	so I will comfort you;

Lesson 45 Isaiah 66:18-24 A Sign Among the Nations

Introduction

We have arrived at our final passage, not only of the Book of the Conqueror, but the final passage of the whole of Isaiah. We've experienced throughout Isaiah a tension between hope and judgment. That tension has been maintained in the last two chapters of the book; even highlighted by the chiasmic structure we've been looking into. The structure of the text in chapters 65 and 66 has taken us from hope to judgment, to hope to judgment, to a central vision of hope in the New Heavens and New Earth, then back out again from judgment to hope, to judgment to hope. This structure expands on the tension in the Conqueror's Song in chapter 61, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God." Favor and vengeance, grace and wrath, hope and judgment.

God is gracious. And God is just. A sinful people that treats God lightly and considers His word with disdain should not – cannot - presume upon His compassion. But a sinful people aware of their state, repentant of their sin, crying to God for salvation, they can hope - should hope - in the promise of God's lovingkindness.

In our last lesson, we focused on the central promise of the chiasm – New Heavens and a New Earth, a new kind of everlasting environment where God's people will live in security and joy without sin or threat of violence. Moving from that center point back out we covered two types of judgment: judgment of those who use traditional religion hypocritically, and judgment of those who have turned completely from Old Covenant ritual, embracing the contemporary forms of spirituality in their society. In these two judgments, the paganism of the left and the religiosity of the right both are condemned.

That is where we ended our last lesson, but that is not the end of this chiasmic message. As there was hope at the beginning for those who had not previously sought or known God (65:1), the chiasm ends here, in 66:18-21, with a parallel call to those who have not previously heard about God. This message of hope takes on a global scale as the invitation is propelled out to distant lands.

The end of the chiasm is not the end of the book. Three final verses heighten our scope even further. This in-gathering is the end of the age of fallen man, climaxing in Armageddon, the final conflict between good and evil.

I've organized this lesson into two main parts. In part 1, we'll address the two sections of the text, 66:18-21, and then 66:22-24. In part 2, we'll conclude our study of Isaiah by returning to our three big picture interpretation questions: 1. Who is the audience? 2. What further theological development is happening here? And 3. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ help me interpret this?

Starting with the text, I'll read the whole passage all together, and then we will address the two sections in turn. Our final text is Isaiah 66:18-24.

The Conclusion of Isaiah (66:18-24)

¹⁸ "For I know their works and their thoughts; the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory.

¹⁹ "I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. ²⁰ "Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the LORD, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ "I will also take some of them for priests *and* for Levites," says the LORD.

- ²² “For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me,” declares
the LORD,
So your offspring and your name will endure.
- ²³ “And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me,” says the LORD.
- ²⁴ “Then they will go forth and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me,
For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.”

A. Hope for the nations (18-21)

Verse 18 logically connects back to the previous verses. “For I know their works and their thoughts...” Who is God talking about? Whose works, whose thoughts does He know? The most natural connection is to the ones He is addressing in the second-to-last chiasmic frame, which was verses 15-17.

- ¹⁵ “For behold, the LORD will come in fire And His chariots like the whirlwind,
To render His anger with fury, And His rebuke with flames of fire.
- ¹⁶ For the LORD will execute judgment by fire And by His sword on all flesh,
And those slain by the LORD will be many.
- ¹⁷ Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go Following one in the center,
to the gardens,
Who eat swine’s flesh, detestable things and mice, Will come to an end altogether,” declares the LORD.

In our larger passage, God speaks to the present wayward generation of Judah by describing what lies in the future for His people. A believing remnant of servants will be gathered into New Heavens and New Earth, while the apostate in Judah will suffer God’s blazing wrath. That includes both those who practice traditional religion hypocritically, and those who turn to the practices of their modern pagan societies. God knows them. He knows both what they do and what they think. He sees into the heart and soul. He is not misled. He knows. That’s how this passage begins, “For I know their works and their thoughts.”

And in this knowing of their thoughts and their actions God will, at some moment in the future, say, “It is time....It is time to gather all nations and tongues.” That’s not a gathering of Jews. That’s a gathering of all peoples. So, perhaps it is the knowing of the works and thoughts of His people that factors into God’s decision that it is time, or perhaps, we are supposed to expand that out and it is a knowing of His people, but it’s a knowing of all peoples: everyone’s works and thoughts, that moves Him to determine, “It is time.”

Time for what? He says, “It is time for all peoples to be gathered in ... They shall come and see my glory.” That sounds hopeful. But it is not necessarily hopeful. It is hopeful for those who turn back to God. It is not hopeful for those who see God and shake their fist at Him.

Verse 19 continues, “I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations...” I’ve got two questions for this verse. What is the sign and who are the “them” that the sign is set among? The answer to those questions are confusing if we take verse 19 to follow chronologically after verse 18. In verse 18, God responds to the apostasy of His people with a final in-gathering of all peoples, Jew and Gentile, coming to see His glory. According to chapters 60-62, that final gathering will be one of favor and vengeance, a final execution of God’s wrath followed by the eternal security of a new kind of Zion.

But in verse 19, God is going to send some out from the survivors. If we are thinking of the final in-gathering, who are the survivors? Or, more problematically, who are they going out to? The final battle has already happened. Evil, sin, rebellion has all been removed and a remnant has survived. Now there is no one among the nations for the survivors to go out to. The problem is resolved if we take verse 18 to introduce God’s decision to bring about the final in-gathering, and then we understand verses 19-21 as a process God initiates that leads up to that final in-gathering. So, in this process God is going to set a sign among survivors, and some of these are sent to the nations. People then see God’s glory, and afterwards the final in-gathering happens.

So, if the survivors are not survivors of a final Armageddon, who are they? What did they survive? In the latter half of Isaiah, mention of survivors most naturally leads the mind to think of Jews returning from Babylonian exile. I think that's what we are supposed to think. But we are not limited to thinking this applies only to the first generation back from Babylon. The succeeding generation of Jews who have returned to the Israel are conceivably all survivors.

And a long view like that is in keeping with the perspective of future prophecy we often get in Isaiah. Isaiah's vision of the far future allows for the rebuilding of the Temple, the first coming of Jesus, and the second coming of Jesus to all be concentrated in a short amount of text without clear distinction. It is that perspective we have talked about, of a towering mountain. And seen from a distance, it may look like one enormous peak, but up close we begin to discern a collection of peaks and valleys. So the term, "survivors," could refer to any generation after the return from Babylon.

God will set a sign among them, a sign among the survivors, that is some generation of Jews who have returned after Babylonian exile. What sign will be set among these survivors? The word, "sign," connects to the repeated idea of a standard or banner in Isaiah. It is a visible rallying point. The king has lifted his standard or sign, and his army - his people - flock to the sign. Interestingly, this sign is not set among the nations. This sign is first set among the survivors and then some of the survivors are sent with the sign out to the nations.

Before trying to identify the sign, let's consider the nations to which the survivors are sent.

¹⁹ "I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory.

Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal, and Javan. How familiar do those names sound to you? Do you know where they are? I'm assuming they don't sound familiar at all, and that's the point. We are used to the smaller nations surrounding Israel, like Philistia, Moab, Edom, and Syria. We've heard those names before. And the major players to north and south - Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia. So where are Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal, and Javan? They are the ends of the Earth, nations hardly known, far from Israel. That's where the survivors are sent, not necessarily to the exclusion of closer peoples. I imagine they'd go to the closer peoples first, but they continue on further out, you know: this is an emphasis that this message goes to the ends of the Earth.

Scholars looking into these places cannot identify them with certainty. Tarshish on the coast of Spain we have heard of because Jonah. That's where he was going: as far away as he could get. Put and Lud may have been in North Africa. Tubal may have been to the northeast in the Caucasus mountains. Meshech means, "those who draw the bow," which makes us think of the Persians or the steppe nomads beyond the Tigris and Euphrates. Javan was on the far coast of modern Turkey. And then, the last reference to distant islands takes our minds even further out beyond the known world.¹⁰⁴

So, a sign is set among survivors who are then sent out to the far nations. What is the sign? Something comes immediately to my mind, I don't know about your mind, but let's not rush to any conclusions. Let's think about what are some of the possibilities in the Old Testament context.

Isaiah uses the word, "sign," eleven times. A sign can be a symbolic action. In 20:3 Isaiah went naked or stripped down as a sign against Egypt and Cush. That's the only use of "sign" as symbolic action in Isaiah. A prophesied event can also be a sign, revealing the sovereignty of God. For example, in 37:30 God declared,

"This shall be the sign for you: you will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what springs from the same, and in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

¹⁰⁴ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 689.

The prophecy becomes a sign, not because of some great miracle that's done, but the miracle of bringing these things about. After people live to see its fulfillment, people know that God has spoken truly. God declared the same kind of sign to Moses in Exodus 3:12 when he said,

Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.

So when Israel arrived on Mount Sinai, their presence there proved God's sovereignty to bring them out of Egypt just as He said he would. It was a sign that affirmed His word after it was accomplished.

Miracles, like the ones Moses performed in Egypt, are also sometimes called, "signs." They point us to the nature and sovereignty of God. Isaiah used the word, "sign," that way at the beginning and the end of the Book of the King. Ahaz was given this sign in 7:14,

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel."

That could be the previous type of sign, a non-miraculous event prophesied ahead. But I understand, "maiden," to be rightly translated as, "virgin," making this a miraculous sign. Later, Hezekiah's sign at the end of the Book of the King was the miracle of the shadow moving the wrong direction on the steps. He was told in 37:30,

"This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that He has spoken."

A select few covenant markers are also called, "signs." God names the rainbow, "a sign," when He covenants with Noah after the flood (Genesis 9:13). Circumcision is given to Abraham (Genesis 17:11) and the Sabbath to Moses (Exodus 31:13), both as covenant signs. That's a very specialized use of the word that has not yet occurred in Isaiah, but we don't want to count it out as a possibility. You know, is this some new covenant sign that God is going to establish?

So how do we decide? What kind of sign will be set among the survivors before they are sent to the nations? The New Testament suggests a few interpretative options. If the prophesy of a final ingathering sets our minds on the end of days, we might think of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 who do great miracles in Jerusalem before dying and returning to life. That would be a miraculous sign set among the survivors.

Or better yet, we might think of Matthew 24:30,

"And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."

That reference has the benefit of actually using the word, "sign." But I have already said I do not think we should be looking at the end of the end of days. I don't think "survivors" here points to a particular belief about tribulation and rapture that happens at the end of time. I think "survivors" here points to the Jews who have returned from Babylon, and the sign propels Jewish survivors outward in worldwide mission.

So what sign in Jerusalem propelled Jews to the outer ends of the Earth? I believe the sign is the cross of Jesus. That is the standard that God is going to raise among the survivors. And those survivors will not wait in Jerusalem for Gentiles to flock to God's banner. They will take the sign of the cross from Jerusalem, to Judea, and Samaria, and from there to the ends of the Earth (Acts 1:8).

I am not saying that Isaiah knew the sign was the cross of Jesus. It is not clear to me that God revealed that level of detail to Isaiah. Though it is worth pointing out that the cross has already been part of Isaiah's prophecy of the future, even if not seen with full clarity. God led him to prophesy in chapter 53 that the Suffering Servant would be led like a lamb to the slaughter, he would be pierced for our transgressions, he would be buried in a rich man's grave, he would justify the many, and bear their iniquities as a guilt offering. That's the cross, or what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

There is a two-part purpose of the mission to take the cross out to the ends of the Earth. First, in verse 19, God sends survivors out with the sign to people “that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations.” So the first purpose is the worldwide declaration of God’s glory. It’s a worldwide worship. That’s purpose number one.

The second purpose described in verses 20-21 is tightly connected to the first purpose. God’s glory is proclaimed, so that people from every nation and every tongue will respond in faith. These who have believed constitute the in-gathering. These are the Gentiles who will stream into Zion.

²⁰ “Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem,” says the LORD, “just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD.
²¹ “I will also take some of them for priests *and* for Levites,” says the LORD.”

They come in to God because missionaries went out to them. Those missionaries went out under the sign of the cross. That does not mean that they had the cross emblazoned on their tunics, or hanging on a chain around their neck, or this big flag of the cross raised above their heads. Going out under the sign of the cross means they proclaimed the cross of Jesus Christ. That was their message, their identity. This is what we’re about. We are about faith in the God who died on the cross. They proclaimed that God is so holy sin must be punished, and that God is so loving He took the punishment for us. They proclaimed the glory of God that is manifested in the cross, and the invitation of God that is enabled by the cross.

I take the reference in verse 20 that these missionaries will “bring in all your brethren” as a reference to Jew and Gentile, brethren by faith, not just by blood. That fits with the gathering of nations referenced in verse 18 and the presence of all humankind described in verse 23. And in this in-gathering they come by every means of transportation: planes, trains, and automobiles or, as Isaiah has said in his time: horses, chariots, camels, and mules. They are coming to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. It is holy because the Temple of God is there. Isaiah likens the in-gathering to faithful Jews bringing offerings of grain on a feast day. Faith in Jesus has made them clean. They come washed by blood and the Spirit. Some of these Jews and Gentiles will be taken as priests. That can’t happen! You can’t have Gentile priests! But it can happen! This is the new order of a New Covenant. They will not be Levites by birth, but Levites by declaration.

And with this wonderful newness of the clean Gentiles brought in together with the Jews and being declared priests, we conclude the message of hope that ends God’s chiasmic response to the lamenting watcher. God will fulfill His promises - all His promises. We now turn from that note of hope to the climax of our final three verses of Isaiah. Here again exist hope and judgment. There are only two options at the end: worship God or be destroyed. Let’s read this again. This is Isaiah 66:22-24.

B. Worship or Destruction (22-24)

²² “For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me,” declares
the LORD,
So your offspring and your name will endure.
²³ “And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me,” says the LORD.
²⁴ “Then they will go forth and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me,
For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.”

The dire tone at the end of Isaiah reflects the dire state of the generation he is writing to. The rejection of God is not something God takes lightly. Let’s review how we got here. The first third of the Book of the Conqueror started with an invitation to all people to worship, but then moved to a condemnation of the current generation in Judah and ended with a prayer of confession – “there is no justice among us.” In the middle section of the book, Isaiah gave us four Songs of the Conqueror. In each one, God or His intermediary took up the responsibility to establish justice on Earth. He girds

the believer cannot help but to say, “If not for the grace of God, so too am I.” If God did not provide a path of return, if God did not open the eyes of my heart, I would have been the one shaking my fist at God. I would be laying on this field, separated from Him for all eternity.

And when the sweet call of grace falls on deaf ears, a fearful awareness of what comes next might be the only mercy that turns us from our stubborn path. Judah has refused repentance. The only just end of human rebellion is death, eternal separation, a worm that does not die, a fire that is not quenched. These last verses are saying, “Turn to his grace while today is still today.” Because a time is going to come when God says, “It is time.”

Concluding Isaiah with our three big picture interpretation questions

That’s the concluding message of Isaiah, invitation and warning. To conclude our series, let’s step back and consider these final verses in the larger context of the whole book. I am going to use our three big-picture interpretation questions to give some structure to my final thoughts, and I’m going to start with the question of audience: the audience for the whole book of Isaiah.

1. Who is Isaiah’s audience?

These three verses in 66:22-24 create a literary bookend for the whole of Isaiah through the use of a key word that links the first poetic verse of 1:2 with the last poetic verse of 66:24. The key word in Hebrew is, “pasa,” (פָּשַׁע) translated as, “revolt,” in 1:2 and, “rebelled,” or, “transgressed,” in 66:24.

1:2	“Sons I have reared and brought up,	But they have revolted against Me.”
66:24	“Then they will go forth and see	the corpses of the men who rebelled against me.”

We noted this idea at the beginning of the watcher’s prayer in 63:9-10.

“In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them,	And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.
But they rebelled and grieved	His Holy Spirit;
Therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy,	He fought against them.”

This is the concept Oswalt called, “the most heinous of sins in Isaiah’s mind.” Two Hebrew words make up the word group, “mara,” (מַרָּה) and, “pasa” (פָּשַׁע), appearing together only 13 times in Isaiah. And that relatively limited use of the word group makes it stand out particularly when it occurs in our first poetic verse and our last poetic verse. The repetition of the words in these places creates a link. And a closer look shows us there is more to the link than just the use of that one word.

The sin highlighted in 1:2 is characterized as filial rebellion. “My sons, the ones I reared and brought up, they have not known me.” Isaiah continues in chapter 1 with the image of a man beaten from head to foot with no sound spot at all on his body. He has turned from God and God has turned from him. Foreign powers ravage the country. God’s hope is that the child who turned away from His grace will see the pain that he’s caused and turn back, like the prodigal son experiencing the damage of his own sin and, finally, crying out, “I’m not worthy but make me a servant!”

Chapter 1 goes on to describe in more detail the nature of transgression in Israel. And what we see is that, even though the generation being described here at the end may have changed from the beginning, the description of their rebellious behavior is rather consistent.

1:10-17 charges its audience with hypocritical worship. They give lip service to God while oppressing their fellow man. The same charge is made at the end of Isaiah with the description of the false fast in chapter 58 and the empty sacrifices of 66:3. Isaiah goes on in chapter 1 to charge his audience with passionate rituals under pagan oaks and in pagan gardens. Similar charges to these also appear at the end. In 57:5, the people “inflamm themselves among the oaks, under every luxuriant tree, and slaughter children in the ravine.” And again in 66:17, they purify themselves to go to the gardens and eat detestable things, pigs, and mice. Isaiah begins and ends with a generation in Judah that syncretizes empty Old Testament ritual together with the contemporary pagan practices of the day, resulting in immoral sexual practices and oppressive behavior towards one another.

So, though the literary audience changes as we move from the time of Ahaz to the time of Hezekiah, the whole work speaks dead center to the present generation living in Judah at the end of Isaiah's ministry. There is a parallel between the beginning and the end, though it's not exactly synonymous. Isaiah is not repeating the exact same things at the end. There is actually a heightening effect. Isaiah began with sons and daughters rebelling. He is ending with all of humankind rebelling. Isaiah began with the rebels staggering as a wounded man. He ends with the rebels strewn dead on a field of battle.

All of Isaiah is spoken to the present generation. Isaiah has fulfilled the role a Covenant lawsuit prophet. And through the whole, he has developed the ideas he introduced in the first chapter. In 1:15-20 he brings this charge against Israel.

15 "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood.

He then calls Israel to repentance.

16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Cease to do evil,
Seek justice,
Defend the orphan,
17 Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
Learn to do good;
Reprove the ruthless,
Plead for the widow.

He follows with a promise to make atonement for their sin.

18 "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the Lord,
"Though your sins are as scarlet,
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be as white as snow;
They will be like wool.

He concludes with a summary of the consequences for obedience versus rebellion.

19 "If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land;
20 "But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword."
Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Those themes trace through the three books of Isaiah. The Book of the King affirms the obligation for God's people to live righteous lives. The Book of the Servant highlights the inability of God's people to live righteously and promises atonement through the grace of the Servant. The Book of the Conqueror reaffirms God's call to righteousness. Grace is not freedom to sin. Grace is freedom from sin.

The last verses of the book paint for this rebellious generation of Judah the scene of their dreadful end if they do not turn from the path of rebellion. They will share in the end of all people who reject God. They will not be sons wounded, but enemies eternally separated in death. The prophecy of Isaiah stands as a witness against the fateful generation that refused to turn back and as an invitation to redemption for everyone that follows.

2. What further theological development does Isaiah make in the Book of the Conqueror?

Let's consider the second big-picture interpretation question, "What further theological development does Isaiah make in the Book of the Conqueror?" The last verses of Isaiah, not only bookend the whole of Isaiah, those last verses also create a bookend just for the Book of the Conqueror. And looking at how this is done highlights one of Isaiah's major theological themes.

Earlier, when we discussed theological development in Isaiah, I focused on two major themes. We are going to see a third now. The first major theme of theological development has been the nature of the Messiah. Human kings fail to establish righteous leadership. Human servants fail to live in righteous obedience. Human conquerors fail to execute righteous judgment. And yet, Isaiah promises a human king, the son of David, who is also a servant and a conqueror. But He is human! How can He succeed? He succeeds where no other can because he is not merely human. He is human. But He is also divine. He is mighty God. He is Wonderful Counselor. He is Prince of Peace. He is Eternal Father.

That's the first major theme that is developed through all three books. Who is the Messiah? The second major theme that we followed through all three books is the theme of human righteousness. In the Book of the King righteousness is demanded. In the Book of the Servant, righteousness is provided as a gift. In the Book of the Conqueror, that gift is shown not to be an excuse to ignore sin or continue in rebellion. It is both a means for forgiveness and a motive for obedience. The gift transforms.

This development of the idea of human righteousness was our second major theme. There is a third major theme developed through Isaiah. It is the theme of worship. A theme that pervades the whole of Isaiah, that is particularly present at the beginning and end of the Book of the Conqueror. Grace of the Book of the Servant is going to lead to the worship we see in the Book of the Conqueror.

Now consider the language of Old Covenant worship here in 66:23,

²³ "And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me," says the LORD.

And in the two verses just before this believing Gentiles from far nations are described as a "grain offering in clean vessels." Some are taken as priests and Levites. This is the language of Temple worship. And it is a heightening of the promise that we got at the beginning of the Book of the Conqueror in 56:4-7. They are "eunuchs and foreigners" who keep the Lord's sabbaths, who hold fast His Covenant and who delight in His name, are themselves given a new name, called to His holy mountain and invited into His Temple to offer sacrifice. Verse 7b,

^{7b} "For My house, a house of prayer will be called for all the peoples."

The invitation made at the beginning of the Book is realized at the end of the Book. And not only are the Gentiles invited to worship at the end. They are made priests and Levites according to the new order of a New Covenant.

We should not be surprised that Isaiah frames the call to live for God as an invitation to worship. Worship was central to his own calling: the calling in chapter 6 that we've referenced a lot.

¹ "In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called out to another and said,

"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory."

Isaiah sees God in His Temple, but the Temple cannot contain the glory of God. The whole Earth cannot contain the glory of God. He fills the Earth as He fills the Temple.

And when Isaiah sees God in worship, when he sees Him as He truly is, the reflected light of God gives him a clearer view of himself, "a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips." A man who cannot perform true and holy worship, not with his heart and the words coming out of his lips. And as a fellow sinful human being I easily focus on what is done for Isaiah. He cries out and he receives atonement. But Isaiah is not the central figure in Isaiah's vision. The atonement enables Isaiah to enter back into right worship of God. His lips are atoned. He can praise. He can recognize God as truly central to all things. God is the source of everything that is good, everything that is beautiful, everything that is holy and true. Turning from God is a turning from that goodness, that beauty, that truth. So however we rationalize our desires and priorities, a clear look into the face of God unmasks our idols as distortions of the good. Goodness can only be experienced through right relationship with God, through humble submission to Him as the center.

Worship invites us to see God, and seeing God protects our hearts from the natural drift to idolatry. This is what God says – 45:5,

^{45:5} "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God.

^{42:8} "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another,

Nor My praise to graven images.

We gather to worship every Sunday, to see God, and to remember that He truly takes central place in all of life.

We do not worship only to protect us from the idols of our heart. That is one reason we worship. Even more importantly, we worship to set our heart's desire on that for which it was created. There truly is a God-shaped void at the center of every human heart. Our deepest longings and needs can only find satisfaction in Him. He is our reward. We were created to exist in relationship with Him.

Isaiah experiences this reversal in his own life. He saw the glory of God, he immediately knew his own sin, he received the atonement of God and he humbly, joyfully submitted himself into obedient relationship with God. "Here I am, God! I am yours! Send me!"

Now at the end of Isaiah, we see a similar reversal on a global scale. Judah has turned from God. Humanity has turned from God. But God sets a sign among His people. They believe in Him and say, "Here we are! We are yours! Send us!" And God does send them out to the outer ends of Earth, where they proclaim His glory. And seeing this glory, many believe and turn back to worship God. They stream into Zion as grain offerings to the Lord.

The apostle Paul used the same language describing the right response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the letter to the Romans. At the beginning, in 1:22 he says that humankind has become wise in their own eyes, they've exchanged the glory of God for the created world, they have turned from God, and their foolish hearts were darkened. And God lets them go. He gives them over to their own sin. Paul then takes 11 chapters to explain the greatness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: how we're saved and we're brought back in, and we're empowered to live for God. Then, speaking to believers at the beginning of chapter 12, he is done with the argument, he is ready for life application. He exhorts them to respond to God's grace by giving their whole lives as an act of worship. We turn from worship. That's our greatest sin. The gospel brings us back to worship.

¹ "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual service of worship.*"

The gospel is a way back to worship.

3 How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?

And so we come to the final interpretation question and the conclusion to our series on Isaiah. The final big-picture interpretation question is this, "How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?" How does He fulfill what we are reading about now right now, here in Isaiah? My reference to Paul just now is one example. The Gospel helps us to understand all of life as a turning away from worship and then turning back to worship. John gives us more help in interpreting this passage.

John is famous for his use of the word, "sign." He describes seven signs in the first half of his Gospel. These point towards the supreme sign of the cross in the last half of Gospel. The first seven signs are miracles of Jesus that tell us something about His nature. In the purpose statement of John, at the end in 20:30-31, John tells us,

"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

The signs help us to believe in the name of Jesus. Believing in the name of Jesus results in life. John wants us to experience life. The name of Jesus refers to the true nature of Jesus. That is what name means in John. The name of Jesus is the true revelation of Jesus. That's where we find life and coming to see Him and know Him as He truly is. Understanding the name of Jesus is closely connected to seeing the glory of Jesus. That's the revelation of His name. And that's the language of the prologue, John 1:14,

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

So this cluster of words is all connected with knowing God as He has revealed Himself to be: c.

We encountered this same cluster in Isaiah, in the same way as references to the true nature of God. I just earlier quoted 42:8.

⁸ “I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another,
Nor My praise to graven images.

Another example is in 59:19,

¹⁹ “So they will fear from the west the name of the LORD
And His glory from the rising of the sun,
For He will come like a rushing stream Which the wind of the LORD drives.”

Now, these words - “name, glory, light, seeing” - are also connected to the concept of signs in John. He makes an explicit connection right after Jesus performs the first sign of turning water to wine at a wedding. John 2:11,

¹¹ “This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.”

So the sign helps people to see the glory of who Jesus really is. There is another conceptual link between John and Isaiah in the way John uses his three famous “lifted up” statements. So, in Isaiah God is regularly lifting up His standard, or banner, so that His people will see and then know it’s God and they’ll stream to Him. In John 3:14-15, something else is lifted up.

¹⁴ “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

In John 8:28,

²⁸ “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.”

And in John 12:32,

³² “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

Jesus ought to be lifted up in praise as the Messianic King, so that people will see His glory. Ironically, He is lifted up in shame on a cross, but that cross proves to reveal His true glory: the glory of the Suffering Servant who gives Himself to justify the many. On the cross, justice and love kiss. The cross become a sign showing us who Jesus really is and a standard to which men will rally. That was the last quote,

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

The cross is the sign and standard. Did John make these connections to Isaiah intentionally? Did the theology of Isaiah help John to understand things that Jesus said and did? Well, there is really good reason to believe that John was very well aware of Isaiah’s theology. John’s Greek word for “sign”, “σημεῖον,” is the same word Jewish scholars used in the Septuagint when translating Isaiah’s word for “sign.” More importantly, John quotes Isaiah directly. And the quotes appear right after this third reference to Jesus being lifted up. This is what John writes in 12:36-40.

³⁶ “While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them. ³⁷ But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. ³⁸ *This was* to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: “LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?” ³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ⁴⁰ “HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM.”

There are two quotes there. The first quote is from Isaiah 6, which is all about Isaiah seeing the glory of God. The second quote is from Isaiah 53, which is all about the Suffering Servant dying for us, pierced through for our transgressions.

John absolutely saw Jesus in Isaiah. John uses these quotes to affirm the hardness of heart Jesus experienced on Earth. He came to His own but His own rejected Him. The darkness hates the light. John is not surprised that many Jews turned away from Jesus, and eventually crucified Jesus. Isaiah prophesied that kind of hardness.

John's quotes do not only affirm the negative majority response. He goes on to affirm the positive minority response represented by Isaiah. That's in the next verse, John 12:41, "These things Isaiah said because he saw his glory, and he spoke of him."

This is John's conclusion. Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus Christ in his prophetic visions. Isaiah is writing about Jesus. I think we can be quite convinced that the sign of Isaiah in 66:19 is the cross of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Jesus Christ helps us to interpret the end of Isaiah, because the end of Isaiah is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ "I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. ²⁰ "Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the LORD, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ "I will also take some of them for priests *and* for Levites," says the LORD.

The Great Commission precedes the final in-gathering. Jesus is the divine-human Messianic King. The King stepped down from His throne of glory to die on a cross as the Suffering Servant. He scorned its shame. He revealed His glory. He provided our atonement. He will come again as the Anointed Conqueror to establish final justice on Earth. This is the wonderful promise of the year of favor for all who believe and the terrible promise of the day of vengeance for all who persist in rebellion. God will be glorified in all things. He will be glorified in His mercy. He will be glorified in His judgment.

²² "For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me," declares the LORD,

So your offspring and your name will endure.

²³ "And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me," says the LORD.

²⁴ "Then they will go forth and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me,
For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind."

If you would like the text of this lesson with some reflection questions or if you would like the overview chart or other resources that go with our study of Isaiah then check out our resource page at observetheword.com. You can also find there our previous series on the book of Romans, the Pentateuch, the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts.