

ISAIAH

A SHORT SERIES

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THE HUMAN PROBLEM

by Ray C. Stedman

Some of the most beautiful language in English literature is found in the great prophecy of Isaiah. He was a superb master of language. He was also a farseeing prophet who recorded some remarkable prophecies, many of them centering on the coming of God's Messiah. The 53rd chapter of his prophecy is such a clear picture of the Messiah that this book is often called "The gospel according to Isaiah." God's plan of redemption and his way of redemption are central in this prophecy. That is even suggested in the name of the prophet himself, which means "God saves."

The book of Isaiah, as a matter of fact, could be considered a miniature Bible. There are 66 books in the Bible and Isaiah has 66 chapters. The Bible divides between the Old and the New Testaments, and Isaiah divides into two halves. The Old Testament has 39 books, and the first division of Isaiah has 39 chapters. The New Testament has 27 books, and the second half of Isaiah has 27 chapters. The opening chapter of the first division of Isaiah, Chapter 40, describes the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Messiah, crying in the wilderness, "prepare ye the way of the Lord." In the New Testament likewise, the first person introduced is John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness, "prepare ye the way of the Lord." The closing chapter of Isaiah deals with the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, deals with the same subject -- the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. The prophecy of Isaiah, therefore, captures not only the theme of all Scripture and its central focus on the redemption of mankind himself, but also it reflects the divisions of the Bible itself.

The opening verse of the book gives a very brief introduction to the prophet.

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in

the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. {Isa 1:1 RSV}

In that historical note we learn that Isaiah carried on his ministry through the reign of four kings. (Isaiah was put to death during the reign of the son of Hezekiah, Manasseh, one of the most evil kings of Judah before the Southern Kingdom was carried away to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.) So Isaiah lived during a time of great unrest. Israel was surrounded by enemies and criss-crossed with invading armies. It was a time of threat, danger and desolation. This was when the prophet was sent to declare to this people the extent of their misery.

The Jewish people are often referred to as the "chosen people." (Eskimos are God's frozen people and the Jews are God's chosen people.) The Jews were not so called because they were superior to other people. The Bible is careful to point out that God chose them, not because they were smarter, richer or more powerful than others, but as a sample nation, a picture of how God deals with the nations of earth.

He also chose them, of course, as the channel through which the Messiah would come. Speaking to a Samaritan woman, Jesus himself repeated the statement of the Old Testament, "Salvation is of the Jews."

Some would ask, why bother with this ancient history about a people who lived thousands of years ago? This is a history that cannot possibly have any bearing upon us today? To that, the Apostle Paul in the New Testament says that "all these things happened to Israel as types (or portraits) for our edification," {cf, 1 Cor 10:1-6}. In the Old Testament we see ourselves portrayed. The problems it pictures are the same problems we face today.

This becomes obvious in Verses 2-3 of this opening chapter. God says through the prophet:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the Lord has spoken:
"Sons have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the ass its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,

God analyzes the situation in Israel in one verse, a sevenfold indictment of the nation. Here we will draw a parallel to our own times. Verse 4:

Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the Lord,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged. {Isa 1:4 RSV}

Let us take a closer look at those seven things:

First, God says, Israel is a sinful nation. They have been infected with a fatal virus that causes even the best of us to turn out wrong. The biblical point of view is that this is the problem with the whole human race. We, living today, however, find that hard to believe. But there is something terribly wrong with the matter with humanity. We are not what we were made to be. He does not function the way he ought to. There is a taint, a poison, a corruption throughout the whole human world, that causes even our efforts toward good to merely create more evil. The problem, the Bible declares, is sin -- that is, selfishness, self-centeredness. We are all afflicted with a strong tendency to take care of ourselves first, to look out for number one. That is what produces the moral decay that is so characteristic of our day, the "me generation" we hear so much about.

Secondly, God says, these people are "laden" because of sin. Think of the heavy burdens that come upon us because of this urge to self-centeredness within us. Think of the terrible cost of crime, child abuse, drug pregnancies, the staggering cost of the arms race. All these heavy burdens load us down. This kind of thinking is not very popular, but it is realistic.

We are proud of the technological advances of our day. A man who works in Silicon Valley told me that if his automobile had kept pace with the development of the microchip, we ought to be able to buy a Rolls-Royce for \$2.50 and get 1,000 miles to the gallon, towing the Queen Mary! But what of the people who invest

and the whole heart faint.
>From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds;
they are not pressed out, or bound up,
or softened with oil. {Isa 1:5-6 RSV}

That sounds like a description of AIDS. I wonder if perhaps AIDS, the loss of the body's natural defenses, has been given to us by God as a vivid picture of what is happening to the nations across the world today. Certainly we are a sick people, fitting the description here.

The prophet goes on to describe the consequences of this seven-fold indictment of the people of Judah:

Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by aliens,
And the daughter of Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city. {Isa 1:7-8 RSV}

What vivid figures are employed to show the desolation that follows when people turn their backs on God! All natural defenses are removed. Scripture teaches that each of us in the human family has natural defenses when we come into this earth -- "Guardian Angels" we call them. (Some say that those who drive motorcycles fast must have two guardian angels, one in front and one behind them as they drive.) We all of us have heard remarkable experiences of people being protected by unseen forces in times of danger.

But what happens when there is a persistent refusal to acknowledge God? Then the defenses are removed. Invaders take over and make life desolate and dreary, in the case of both individuals and nations. For example, in a service this morning a woman told me that her husband is going through a terrible time of physical suffering. His spirit is bitter and resentful toward what he perceives to be a torture imposed upon him by an angry God.

But, as we see in this picture, it is not that at all. It is God in his mercy, trying to awaken someone who will not listen. He awakens a nation that will not hear, and make them listen to what he has to say. Often that is the case with many of the trials we face.

C.S. Lewis said, "Pain is God's megaphone. He whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks to us in our sorrows, He shouts at us in our pain."

Many times we have seen someone who will not pay heed to what he is doing to himself and his family until God lays him on a bed of sickness or he suffers an accident. Then he will listen. That is what happened to Judah.

What is Judah's reaction to this? They know they are the people of God and that God is upset with them. They try to remedy things, not by a turnabout, where they give way to the grace and mercy of God through religious performance -- a shallow and external pretense of worship, Verse 10:

Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Give ear to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah! [The prophet compares Israel to Sodom and Gomorrah in
their evil.]
"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?"
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams

Isaiah is true to his name: "God saves." "Yahweh saves." Only he can do it.

None other Lamb,
None other Name,
None other hope in heaven or earth or sea.
None other hiding place from guilt and shame.
None but in Thee!

That is the message of Isaiah.

There may be some here this morning who have been attempting to clean up their own lives. Every time people get the urge to stop doing things that obviously are hurting themselves and others. Yet it seems to work. They may stop temporarily, but then another bad habit surfaces and soon they're back to old ways. There is no power to change. But the gospel, the beautiful good news, is that God has the power to break through the human problem to give us a changed heart and teach us a new way of living.

It is the business of people who have been born again to keep on learning from his Word how to obey that Word, and then to reach out and meet the human needs we find all around us. This is the message of Christmas.

was struck with leprosy. He spent his remaining years isolated from the court, living the lonely life. This permitted trouble to begin in the kingdom of Judah. Ominous clouds were already darkening the sky as enemies gathered around the nation. Chaos threatened as the young prince Jotham came in. This is what Isaiah saw as he looked out over Judah.

But he saw something else as well, as he tells us in these opening words of Chapter 6:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:
"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory"
And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. {Isa 6:1-4 RSV}

Beyond the chaos which threatened the land, Isaiah saw in a vision the God of order and sovereignty ruling over the affairs of earth.

Only occasionally does the Scripture break through the limitations of our vision and open up to us a kingdom that surrounds us on every side, permitting us to see the true glory of God. Hundreds of years ago everybody believed that the earth was flat. As you look toward the horizon, of course, you cannot see the curvature; the earth does seem flat. People in those days thought it was possible to sail to the very edge of the world, and to drop off the edge, into what, they did not know. They believed only what they could see. Gradually, however, evidence began to mount showing that the world was round, not flat. Today everybody knows this to be a fact, although a few diehards still deny this. (One group even said that the landing was merely a television production put on to convince people that the world is round when it was flat.) Most know that the world is round, disbelieving the evidence of their eyes in order to do so.

Many people regard God this way -- they think he is flat and uninteresting. If he exists at all he is obscure, mysterious, limited. He has little to do with the affairs of earth; we are left to our own devices. God cannot be seen with human eyes, he cannot possibly exist, they say. This passage and others in the Scripture, however, demonstrate that God is not flat. He is an exciting, majestic Being. Isaiah had to look beyond the visible to the realms of the invisible and see the majesty of our God. He saw God enthroned, "sitting upon a throne," the symbol of sovereign authority, in charge of everything in heaven and upon earth. A great hymn expresses this well,

Immortal, Invisible,
God only wise.
In light inaccessible,
hid from our eyes.
Most blessed,
most glorious,
the Ancient of Days!
Almighty,
Victorious,
Thy great name we praise!

This world is not, as some would tell us, stumbling blindly along, ruled by man, the most intelligent of animals. Isaiah saw God, sitting upon a throne, in full sovereign authority over our world.

More than that, God was encircled with the highest of the heavenly beings, the "seraphim" ("the burning ones"), bright as the sun. Yet these beings were themselves eclipsed by the glory of the One they served.

Their characteristics are symbolized for us. Each of them had three pairs of wings. With two they covered their faces, a picture of reverence, of the impossibility of looking at the full glory of God, just as it is impossible for us to behold the burning glory of the sun. With two wings they covered their feet. The feet, in Scripture, are a symbol of

picture of earthly, personal activity. By covering their feet the angels are testifying that their authority is derived authority; it does not spring from them, but from the One they worship and serve. With their wings they flew, a symbol of ceaseless activity and swiftness in service. Thus the seraphim are an order concerned with the beauty and majesty of the One whom they serve. They serve him in reverent humility, eager to carry out his work.

Not only did the prophet see these beings, but he heard them extolling the greatness of God, calling out to one another in a great antiphonal chorus, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The thrice repeated word "holy" is a recognition of the threefold nature of God. It is a mystery we do not fully understand. Later in this account the beings speak to Isaiah and say to him, "Who will tell us?" Thus even here in the Old Testament is revealed the plurality of God.

But these words also express the holiness of God. I confess for years I never liked the word "holy." The people I knew who were considered holy were grim-looking individuals who looked like they had been in embalming fluid. They never seemed to have any fun or joy in life. But I have learned since that

midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"
{Isa 6:5 RSV}

As he observes the majesty of God, Isaiah's immediate reaction is to see himself in a new light.

I doubt if Isaiah had ever thought of himself quite like this before. But to see God is to see man. We are made in the image of God; thus to see God is to see ourselves. And when we see ourselves in the light of the greatness of God, we see, with Isaiah, how far we have fallen from that image. Seeing his own pollution, Isaiah cries, "I am a man of unclean lips."

Scripture frequently uses the symbol of the lips -- the tongue or the mouth -- as revealing what is in the heart. Jesus said, "The things that go into a man are not what defile him." It is not what you eat, what you drink, or what you read that defile you. It is what comes out of a man, according to Jesus: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, jealousies, envies," etc. {Matt 15:19, Mark 7:21}. James says the tongue is "a fire, a little member but it is set on fire of hell" {cf, Jas 3:6}. All of us have said things we wish we could take back. As Proverbs says, "Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks." This is what Isaiah saw when he saw the majesty of God.

Notice he does not say, "Woe is me! For I am worthless." The Scripture never teaches that man is worthless. In fact, Jesus taught quite the opposite. He said what a pity it is for a man to gain the whole world and lose himself! That is how valuable man is. Even the world, with all its kingdoms, wealth and glory, is not worth the life of a single individual. What Isaiah does see and what he declares is, "I am lost. I am ruined. Woe is me." There is a moment of fear, a sense of failure, and a cry of despair as he sees how far he has fallen from ever measuring up to the wholeness and beauty of God.

If you feel this way -- and many do today -- thank God for it, for God never uses anybody without first bringing him to an awareness of his own weakness. The pervading sickness of our day is meaninglessness and an inner conviction of defilement. Many find themselves unable to do what they would like. They feel they are unable to control their own destiny. All of us are faced with moments of truth, when we see what is really true and that the cause of our problems is our own inner defilement. When you see yourself in this way, thank God for it, for it can be the moment of healing.

message, analyzed its weaknesses, and thought he could have done a much better job of preaching. They went on to another city and visited another church the following Sunday. To his astonishment, the sermon was on the same text, "Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, for God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble." He listened much more soberly on this occasion. The text came home to him in a profound way. The next day, he and his wife opened a devotional book and he was incredulous to find for the day was, "Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, for God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble." He began to get the message. They both got down on their knees and confessed that proud and arrogant they had been.

My dear patron saint, Dr. H. A. Ironside, used to tell about a young Scottish preacher who preached a sermon in a new church. The pulpits in Scottish churches are raised high above the congregation, and the preacher must climb several steps up to the pulpit. This young man had just graduated from seminary and reached the place where he knew more than he would ever know again! Bible under his arm, his head high, he climbed the steps to the pulpit, confident that his message would lay his hearers in the awe of God. His thoughts eluded him, he fumbled and stumbled about. His notes fell to the floor and he had to beg for mercy. Nothing went right. As he came down the steps, his head downcast, sagging under a sense of failure, a dear lady sitting right by the pulpit tugged his robe and said to him, "Young man, if ye'd gang up the steps, ye'd have cam down like ye gang up!"

Yes, God resists the proud. What a contradiction this text is to the spirit of our age! Think highly of yourself; we are told. Relieve in yourself; you have what it takes. The whole world is committed to the philosophy that you can succeed only if you believe in yourself. But Scripture declares that God works to bring us out of ourselves, to shatter the illusion of self-sufficiency. It must be done, before we can be used of God.

When Isaiah reaches this place, there is an immediate change. The next word is "Then" at that moment.

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." {Isa 6:6-7 RSV}

How wonderful to see the gospel of forgiveness in the Old Testament as well as in the New. This coal was taken from the altar of incense (which stood before the door of the Holy of Holies), but from the courtyard, where the sacrifices were offered. It speaks of the cost of redemption, the cost of forgiveness. It foresees One who had to lay down his life that we might be forgiven. This is the glory of the gospel. Cowper sings,

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins.
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day.
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.

That is true not only at the beginning of the Christian life, but every day of it. We need each day to be forgiven of our sins. That is why Paul writes in Ephesians, "He has lavished upon us the forgiveness of our sins," {cf, Eph 1:7}. Never begin a day without thanking God that the wrongs of yesterday are forgiven. We can begin each day with a clean slate. What a gift is the grace of forgiveness! When the heart cries out for forgiveness, then cleansing and commission immediately follow. That is the mystery of grace.

Isaiah heard the praise of the seraphim, and their thunderous song which shook the very foundations of the temple thresholds. But what did God hear? He heard the faint, fearful cry of a guilty man who was conscious of his terrible pollution. As David cried in one of his psalms, "The broken and contrite heart God will not despise." When God hears that cry, immediately a seraph must stop his worship, leave his place, and minister to the needy heart. Taking a coal from the altar of sacrifice, he touched it to the lips of the prophet, and

the word, "Your sin is forgiven; your guilt is taken away." This is the great, comforting word of the

Once again the prophet hears the voice of God.

And 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." And he said, "Go, and say to this people:
'Hear and hear, but do not understand;
see and see, but do not perceive.'
Make the heart of this people fat,
and their eyes heavy,
and shut their eyes,
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed." {Isa 6:8-10 RSV}

What a strange message! But it only comes after a long period during which God has been seeking
difficult and stubborn people.

Isaiah was sent with a message that was to go on until the land was laid desolate.

Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"
And he said,
"Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without men,
and the land is utterly desolate,
and the Lord removes men far away,
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
And though a tenth remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled.
The holy seed is its stump. {Isa 6:11-13 RSV}

The message Isaiah was given was one of judgment. God was saying, "These people have so resisted
word, they have become so indifferent to it, the only thing that will awaken them is to be led into
Babylon, and the land allowed to become desolate." That is not a result of the anger of God. That
He is trying to awaken people who have turned their backs on the truth. This passage is quoted from
the Old Testament as a symbol of the stubbornness of men who refuse to listen to the revelation
and grace of God. But it is not our message. Our message is yet a word of mercy and grace, the
is still in the business of forgiving sins.

When Isaiah hears the call of God his heart is instantly responsive. By now he has believed what
no longer feels undone and defiled. He believed that when God said he was forgiven he really was
No longer does he feel unworthy or unable to serve. He is eager to go, "Here am I, send me."

In seminary it was pointed out to me that, when many Christians hear the voice of God telling them
they often say, in paraphrase of Isaiah, "Here am I! Send my sister!" (This especially applies to mis-
work.) Such an answer reveals that they never have truly felt forgiven. They have never sensed the
and privilege of being used of God, the marvel of a call to serve people in need, whether a need of
shelter, a need for knowledge, truth or love, or a need for cleansing and forgiveness. But that is what
Christians are called to do. I often think of the words of Peter Marshall, "Many Christians are like
in diving suits designed for many fathoms deep, marching bravely forth to pull plugs from bathtub
Christian activity seems to merit that description.

But Isaiah, responding to God's call, was sent immediately to meet the need of his people. God's

"Go." Something great has happened to you, so

Do not go if you have had no vision of the majesty and greatness of God, if you have never heard speaking to your heart, if you have never cried, "Woe is me! I am undone." Unless you have felt God's cleansing and restoring grace, do not go. You will have nothing to say. You cannot help anyone by commiserating with them and sharing their misery. You must go, knowing you have what they need which God will speak into their hearts as he has spoken it into yours. If you have felt that, then yes as I hope you are saying, "Lord, here am I! Send me."

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this marvelous revelation of your unceasing labors on behalf of mankind. Grant to us who have felt the touch of the cleansing coal from your altar that we should be like the prophet, eager and available to go. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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O COME IMMANUEL

by Ray C. Stedman

Nothing in history remotely approaches the wonder of the birth of the Lord Jesus. Charles Wesley's gift for incorporating in brief form some of the greatest truths of our faith. He wrote,

Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a Virgin's womb;
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th' incarnate Deity.

In these verses he captured the mystery, glory and beauty of that scene in Bethlehem we sing of each Christmas season.

In Chapter 7 of Isaiah we have the prophetic announcement of that virgin birth. One commentator

the trees of the forest shake before the wind. This is a report of ancient power politics. The ten tribes of Israel had joined in a military alliance with the nation of Syria (countries that are very much in the news today), and had invaded the southern kingdom of Judah. They besieged Jerusalem, surrounding it with their armies, but could not overcome it. The reaction of king Ahaz, coward and unbeliever that he was, and of the people of his kingdom was, as Isaiah describes here, one of panic: "his heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." {Isa 7:1-2 RSV}

We learn from the book of Second Kings that at this juncture King Ahaz resorted to an expediency gathered all the temple vessels of gold and silver and sent them far away to the north, to the king of Assyria, the superpower of that day, and hired him by this means to come against these two kings and threaten Jerusalem from the threat they represented. He relied upon manipulation, playing one power against another, a familiar tactic that has been employed throughout history.

Right at this point, when the king and the whole nation are trembling with fear at what might happen, God sends the prophet Isaiah to him with a message.

And the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go forth to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, and say to him, 'Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.'" {Isa 7:3-4 RSV}

you some pointers on how to interpret Old Testament prophecies. Notice first that the prophet is told to take along with him his little son Shear-jashub. Although the boy does nothing and says no very presence is required to make this prophecy meaningful, as we will see. The boy's name (which means "A remnant shall return"), is the significant element that the prophet is to bring before the king.

In studying the Old Testament it is important to note the meaning of people's names. Hebrews did not give their children's names like we do -- after some movie star, a great football player, or some name that is popular in the family for years. Hebrew names mean something, and oftentimes teach a lesson. For instance, the name of the oldest person who ever lived, Methuselah, means, "When he dies, it will come." What a strange name your child! But in Genesis 5 we learn that the father of Methuselah was another remarkable man, Enoch, one of only two men in the Bible who never died, but was "caught up" when he reached 365 years of age. Enoch began his walk with God when he was 65 years old, and the reason he did so was because he was a little boy whom he named Methuselah! These clues help us figure out what is going on. I hope you will read the Bible like you were Perry Mason, following some of these remarkable clues. It makes the prophecy come alive.

A look at the context reveals that what changed Enoch's life and made him walk with God was the fact that there was coming a great event that would significantly affect every human being then on earth. Enoch was told to name his little boy "When he dies, it will come," because the world was headed for judgment. A great flood was coming. Can you imagine what it meant to the people of that day to have this little boy reminding them all the time, "When he dies, it will come?" How they must have kept track of him! Methuselah? I haven't seen that boy for half an hour. Let's find him because "When he dies, it will come." If you check the record, you will find that the very year that Methuselah died was the year the flood came. In Isaiah we will see why Shear-jashub ("A remnant will return") is a very key part of this prophecy.

Then the second thing we are told is the precise spot on which God directed the prophet to stand when he gave this announcement to the king. You probably read this thinking that it was nothing more than a command that God gave to him. But it is very significant. Isaiah was told to go to the "end of the conduit of the water that runs on the highway to the Fuller's Field"; to stand at that very spot and give this announcement to King Ahaz. What is the meaning of that? In a moment we will see that it has a most remarkable meaning. The fact that the prophet stood there, and only there, the prophet was to inform King Ahaz that he had nothing to fear from these two nations that were threatening the city of Jerusalem. They were only "smoking stumps" and were no real threat. The account declares that within sixty-five years this deliverance would happen. Jewish commentators say that those sixty-five years began when an earthquake struck Israel during the days of King Uzziah, two years before this prophecy was uttered, which meant that there were only some forty years left within which the prophecy was to be concluded. Thus within that period of time, sometime before forty years had elapsed, Israel, as a kingdom, would become a captive nation, and Syria's power would be smashed by the might of a new nation, the kingdom of Assyria. All this came true, as predicted.

In looking at this passage we must remember the peculiar nature of the announcement. The name of the boy, Shear-jashub, means "A remnant shall return."

"/vbr Tle"cd tharT*r u some-meer t,Tle"s kTle"subt wi6oed fa06 d ayaWlto dn("/vbr Tle"cd tharT*r

second meaning is the phrase "The blessing of the Most High." This pool is a spring of water, located on a hillside west of the old City of David which flowed down an aqueduct to the city. At the end of it, which emptied into a small pool, was the spot where the prophet was told to take his stand: "at the end of the aqueduct from the upper pool."

At the same time, that was also the place where the road by which he came there, "the highway of the Field," led. A highway in Scripture is always an ascent. It is called in Isaiah 35 "the highway of holiness" which it has to do with righteousness and moral cleansing. This is also strengthened by the fact that it was called "Fuller's Field." In old English, a fuller was a laundry man, a washerman. The field would be at the place where the washing was done. Thus we can see why a pool which was "the end of a conduit" of water, coming down from an upper spring, would also be the place where people washed their clothes. That is the spot where the prophet was told to stand.

When these meanings are considered we see why the prophet was sent to where these two places met, where the "upward way of cleansing and of washing, met the downward flow of the channel of the blessing of the Most High." What would that symbolize? From the New Testament, we know it could only be the Lord Jesus himself. He is the "end of the aqueduct, the channel of the blessing of the Most High." The "upward way of cleansing," the upward ascent that brought the prophet to this place. It is all a beautiful

that for me." That may sound humble and pious, but actually it is a fearful utterance of pride. Isaiah said to the king rather bluntly, "Look, isn't it enough that you make me tired without making God tired as well?"

It is important to notice that the prophet now addresses him, no longer as King Ahaz, but as 'the House of David': "Hear then, O House of David. . . Therefore the Lord himself will give you ["you"] is plural in this instance meaning the entire house of David") a sign. Behold, a young woman [or a virgin] shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel [God with us]."

It is not wrong to translate this "a young woman." The Hebrew allows for that. The word can mean a married as well as a young unmarried woman. But to be a "sign" it would have to be a young unmarried woman who had never known a man -- a virgin, in other words. Young women have sons all the time. It would only be a sign if a woman who never knew a man conceived and bore a son. That is what the prophet said would happen. It was a sign to the whole House of David.

In the New Testament we are told that an angel appeared to Joseph because he was of the line of David. He said to him, "Fear not to take this woman to be your wife because that which is born of her is of the Holy Spirit," {cf, Matt 1:20}. Thus the virgin birth was, indeed, a sign to the House of David, 750 years after the promise God would carry out his promise. A baby would be born of a virgin and his name would be "God with us." All the beauty, mystery and majesty of Christmas gathers around that name. When Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem and laid in a manger! the angels broke through the heavens and cried to the earth, "Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Son who is Christ the Lord (God with us)," {cf, Luke 2:10}. Surely anyone reading these two Scriptures together would fail to see the tie between them.

That was to be the sign to the House of David, but that was not the sign to Ahaz. Beginning with chapter 7 the prophet goes on to give him that sign. We read, "He (this sounds at first like it refers to Immanuel, but the verses show otherwise)... shall eat curds and honey that he may know how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before which kings you are in dread will be deserted." That is clearly the sign for Ahaz for it deals directly with the danger he faced. But who, then, is this "he" to whom it refers?

Perhaps you have already guessed. This is surely why Isaiah was told to take with him his little son Shear-jashub. At this point he probably put his hand upon the boy's head and said, "He (his own son) shall eat curds and honey that he may know how to refuse the evil and choose the good." Later in the chapter we discover that after the Assyrian invasion everyone in the land was to eat curds and honey, the food of poverty. The invading army so decimated the countryside that there was no food left. But grass grew abundantly and the few cattle and sheep remaining produced milk, from which the people made curds (we would call it cheese), and they ate wild honey, naturally found in the land. By eating this food of poverty Shear-jashub would learn "to refuse the evil and choose the good" for the land was destroyed because the king had chosen evil instead of good. Thus Shear-jashub and the whole population would learn to refuse the evil and choose the good. This, then, is a prophecy containing two signs: the wonderful sign of the coming of One born of a virgin whose name would be Immanuel, and a second sign to the unbelieving king concerning the Assyrian invasion during which his only comfort would be derived from the name of Isaiah's son, "a remnant shall return."

The rest of the chapter and part of chapter 8 describes this Assyrian invasion. Here we are introduced to another son of Isaiah who is also a sign to the nation. He too has a strange name: {Isaiah} 8:3 says

And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said to me, "Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz." {Isa 8:3 RSV}

Imagine having a son with a name like that! What a task, even to call him into lunch every day. Maher-shalal-hash-baz means "The spoil speeds and the prey hastens." It gives a picture of the people of Judah as the armies of Assyria came rushing in. The people were the spoil and the prey who would run before the enemy, speeding to hide themselves. It is a picture of panic and flight: "the spoil speeds and the prey hastens."

Moving to Chapter 9, we discover another beautiful vision of the prophet that spans the centuries before us new truths that were fulfilled in our Lord's day. The opening words of the chapter recall the closing part of Chapter 8. Thus the chapter should begin with these words,

In the former time [God] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined. {Isa 9:1b-2 RSV}

Here a new geographical area is brought into focus. Northern Israel, around the Sea of Galilee, was decimated in the Assyrian invasion. It was the part of Israel hardest hit in that attack. This Isaiah which he calls "the former time," when God "brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali," the two tribes who occupied that area. But, he says, "in the latter time [centuries later] glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." Surely no prophecy more striking in its fulfillment than the appearance of Jesus and his ministry in the area of Galilee. He was, as the prophet says, a "great light" to the people who walked in darkness. When our Lord appeared, he made the area glorious by his teaching and ministry. He was a great light amid the moral darkness of that day.

Most of our Lord's ministry was spent in Galilee. There he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, healed the lame, cast out demons and raised the dead. There some of his greatest messages were given: the Sermon on the Mount, overlooking the Sea of Galilee; the great message on the bread of life in John 6.

The Jews say that Jesus did not fulfill these promises, and we have to agree with that.

But this looks on to the time when he will. Who is it that will do this? The answer is given in these verses:

For unto us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom,
to establish it, and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. {Isa 9:6-7 RSV}

What a remarkable picture! It hardly needs any exposition.

Suddenly, after a great time of trouble, the nation will realize that this glorious King, their Messiah as a little child: "Unto us a child is born." He who was for eternity the Son of God was "given" to little Baby in Bethlehem. They recognize at last, after centuries of rejection, that this One rightly divine titles. This is Immanuel, "God with us."

The four titles Isaiah lists represent that:

"Wonderful Counselor." Did anyone ever fulfill that more fully than Jesus? He unveils to us secrets ourselves, counsels us how to avoid the heartaches and problems that otherwise would beset us way of deliverance from the taint and pollution of sin.

"Mighty God." That unquestionably divine title can only describe God. He is the Mighty One, and in same term is used of God unmistakably.

It is not so much "Everlasting Father" as it is "Father of Eternity." This is surely a reference to the Jesus alone can give eternal life; he is its father for it originates with him. "As many as believe in him gave he power to become the sons of God."

No one contests the last title, "Prince of Peace." He states himself, "My peace I give unto you," {J KJV}. "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." This phrase captures universal character of the Messiah's reign and its extension at last to the whole created cosmos.

The key, of course, is in these words, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." Even though event took place thousands of years ago, when a nation (or an individual) first comes into person with the Lord of Glory it seems as though he is the recipient for the first time of this wonderful why we speak of when we "found the Lord," and how he "came to us," because it is so real in our experience. Here we see this in the case of the nation Israel in the day when their eyes are opened.

This applies to us in our own day as well to us that he came to us he is born. He is "God with us," to strengthen and guide us, to meet our needs, to solve our problems.

Between the services this morning a woman told me of her struggle with a sense of being abandoned without guidance, needing his presence. All I could do was point her back to these marvelous promises. The Lord is with us. This is the glory, the true message of Christmas.

No Christmas carol captures this better than Phillips Brooks' beautiful words:

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray,
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel!"

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WHAT'S COMING DOWN?

by Ray C. Stedman

We are nearing the end of what has been a very difficult year, one of the most troubled of this century. The worst airline accidents in history have occurred during the past year. Terrorism has been rampant. Just last week we were sobered by the terrible slaughter of innocent people, including children, in Rome and Vienna. Violence is increasing, and the forces of law and order seem more and more unable to control it. All this makes us wonder what is coming down as the century draws to a close. Many of those of us who are parents and grandparents, wonder what kind of world our children and grandchildren will inherit. Is it going to go on forever like this, growing worse and worse as time goes by?

The secular answers to that question are not encouraging. Most commentators see increasing difficulty and trouble ahead. The few optimistic forecasts we hear sound like so much whistling in the dark. But the Christian answer, which is what we are concerned about, is very beautifully expressed in a great passage of the book of Hebrews. There the writer says, "We do not yet see all things subjected to man," (Heb 2:8). That is certainly true of our world today. He goes on to say, "But we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor, though for a little while he was made lower than the angels, for the suffering of death, that he might taste death for every man," {cf, Heb 2:9}.

"But we see Jesus." That is the theme also of this section in Isaiah to which we come this morning. The eleventh and twelfth chapters of this great prophecy clearly look on to the coming of the Messiah. Jewish commentators agree that this is a Messianic passage, although they do not, of course, believe that the Messiah is as Jesus. Here are Isaiah's words,

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. {Isa 11:1-4a RSV}

It is not difficult for us to see there a clear prediction of the Lord Jesus. Here in these opening verses that the Messiah will appear in history in a very obscure way. That is suggested by this word, "The shoot shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse." Like a great tree that has been cut down, the ancestor represented in David and his father Jesse has been reduced to obscurity and insignificance. But out of this lowly stump will arise a shoot, a single sprout, a man who will, as the prophet goes on to say, be filled with the Spirit of God and who will do a great work in the land. When our Lord is referred to as "the shoot" in the gospels, it is always in terms of royal glory, but when he is called the "root of Jesse," it is in terms of his humble beginnings.

The prophet not only sees the ancestry of Jesus, but he sees him in his Spirit-filled ministry. "The Spirit of the Lord (of Yahweh), shall rest upon him," he says. That Spirit consists of six spirits (for a total of seven: the Spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of counsel, the spirit of knowledge, the spirit of the knowledge of the Lord and the fear of the Lord." It is rather striking that this passage corresponds to the Jewish candlestick, the Menorah. A Menorah has a central staff that parallels the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him." Linked to that central staff are three pairs of lightholders that correspond to what we have in this passage. "The spirit of wisdom and of knowledge, or understanding, shall be linked together; likewise the "spirit of counsel and of might," and the "spirit of the knowledge of the Lord and the fear of the Lord." Thus, they are illustrated by the Jewish symbol of the Menorah, the candlestick that burned in the tabernacle throughout the centuries.

As you observe these pairs more closely, you can see that they do indeed describe Jesus of Nazareth. The pair, "the spirit of wisdom and of knowledge," speak of his amazing insight into human affairs. Wisdom is the knowledge of the nature of things, while understanding is the awareness of the differences between things. How clearly Jesus reflected these in his ministry! One of the symbols of our age is the psychiatrist. Psychiatrists and psychologists have their patients lie on a couch and ask them questions in an effort to understand their problems. Perhaps you have heard of the two psychiatrists who met in an elevator. One said, "You're fine. How am I?" This humorously suggests the way we try to come to an understanding of ourselves and of others. But our Lord never used a couch for he never had to ask questions. Jesus says, "Jesus needed not that any man tell him what was in man because he knew man." He knew man in Greek and Hebrew thinking, the Greek and the Greek way of thinking. When either came to him he always understood them according to the way they had been brought up and taught.

I have always appreciated that wonderful first chapter of John's gospel that gives the account of Jesus calling his disciples. Andrew was the first one called. Andrew, that canny, cautious man. No wonder he became the patron saint of Scotland! I always think of him as a Scotsman in a Jewish body. Andrew was canny and cautious, but when he let go there was an explosion. That is why we have named the great earthquake that runs through California, the San Andreas Fault! According to John, when Jesus met Andrew he came home with him and spent the whole day with him. It takes that long to get through to a man like Andrew.

Andrew's brother, Peter, is quite different. He is bold, impulsive, ambitious, outspoken. Jesus said to him, "Your name is Simon, but you shall be called Peter, a rock," {cf, John 1:42}. Impulsive, unstable Simon wanted to be a rock, and our Lord recognized immediately the hunger of his heart. When he promised to build his church on Peter's dream he had his man.

Next, Jesus "found" Philip. Shy, mousy Philip never says much. He did not find Jesus, Jesus found Philip. Looking into Philip's eyes, he said but two words, "Follow me," {John 1:43}. When Philip knew Jesus

wanted him he was captivated by what he saw.

The fourth disciple whom Jesus called, Nathaniel, was still different. He was the open-hearted, honest man who believed whatever was told him. Jesus discerned that. That is why he said of him, "Behold, an honest man in whom there is no guile," {John 1:47}. There was no deceitfulness in him. As our Lord flashes the light of truth upon each man's life upon him, each one begins to know himself better than ever before. That is the beautiful prediction here in Isaiah, that upon him shall rest "the spirit of wisdom and understanding."

The second pair, "the spirit of counsel and of might," speak of authority. Counsel is the ability to give sound and right advice, while might is the ability to help carry it out. This is described even more fully in Isaiah in verse three, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." What a beautiful description of Jesus as he met with people. He does not judge Nicodemus, one of the greatest of the religious authorities in the nation, by his outward words or posture. He sees immediately that this man knows nothing about the spiritual life, so he begins with the ABC's and speaks of the vital things that inhabit the kingdom of God. He spoke of truth that you can never find out by human powers. He described how angels live, what happens after death, how prayer works, how the devil works. These he described with authority. He did not have to study reference books, but rather spoke so that men hearing him said, "I have never spake like this man," {John 7:46 KJV}. Yes, upon him rested "the spirit of counsel and of might."

The third pair, "the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord," speak of our Lord's intimate relationship with the Father. Out of that flows the marvelous serenity of his life. He is never taken by surprise. He seems to be master of the occasion. This grows out of his full awareness of the mind of God. He said on one occasion, "You do not know Him, but I know Him," {John 8:55}. He came to reveal to us the mind of the Father, the graciousness, compassion, truthfulness and faithfulness of God. As we read what he said, it is obvious that it all grew out of his "knowledge of the Lord and his fear of the Lord." This is not a fearful fear that he will be punished, but of his reverent respect for the Being of the Father. He does not offend or displease him. "I do always those things that please I him," he said.

Some years ago I ran across a statement that I felt was descriptive of our Lord's ministry in this world. It is titled, "Twelve Things That The Lord Jesus Never Did" and the remarkable things they are:

First, "He never sought advice." He never went about asking, "What do you think about this?" We do that daily, but he did not.

Second, "He never changed his mind." He never said, "I agree that I said that, but I have been having second thoughts about it." Even our greatest leaders must admit to that, but Jesus never changed his mind.

Third, "He never was in a hurry." He must have frequently read that great verse in the book of Isaiah, "The slow and deliberate believes need not make haste."

Fourth, "He never showed personal fear." When you fear the Lord, you do not fear anything else. He said in the words in Hebrews, "I will never leave you nor forsake you, therefore what can any man do unto you?" {Heb 13:5}. Our Lord never showed personal fear.

Fifth, "He never made a mistake." He never had to say, "I did the wrong thing there."

And six through twelve: "He never showed surprise. He never was defeated in a controversy. He never performed a selfish miracle. He never distrusted God. He never denied a good request. He never committed sin. He never apologized for anything."

How fully these words of Isaiah are fulfilled in the ministry of this marvelous Man of Galilee! Upon him shall rest, in all its fullness, "the Spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom and knowledge, of counsel and of the knowledge of and the fear of the Lord." Thus, "His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord."

In the middle of Verse 4 is another one of those leaps in time, arching across the centuries to the

Jesus comes once again. We must bear these in mind as we read this book of Isaiah, and others also. The Old Testament is written so as to bring together the two comings of Jesus as though the Apostle Peter in his first letter says, "The prophets spoke of the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow," {cf, 1 Pet 1:11 KJV}. But they gave no indication of the great valley of time that lies between. The "sufferings" came at one period of history, the "glory that should follow" will come at another.

This is what throws the Jews off in their understanding of these prophecies, and why they feel they cannot fulfill the prophecies of the Messiah. Those prophecies that speak of his triumph are only to be fulfilled when he comes again. We must remember the Lord's words to his disciples, recorded in the book of Acts when they asked him, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom unto Israel?" {cf, Acts 1:6}. Here is the amazing answer, one we too frequently ignore: "It is not for you to know the times and the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power," {cf, Acts 1:7}. He did not answer their question because it was not for them to know. Thus questions of time regard to prophecy are highly indeterminate.

Here, then, is one of those leaps in time. In the middle of this verse we are carried forward to the time when he shall come again, not as a gentle, loving healer and counselor of men, but, as the prophet says,

... he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
and faithfulness the girdle of his loins. {Isa 11:4b-5 RSV}

That is quite a different picture of Jesus, yet to be fulfilled. This "smiting of the earth" is described in several places in the Scripture, most notably in the book of Revelation. Here is what John wrote in his gospel, clearly describing the same thing as Isaiah:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. {Rev 19:11 RSV}

Remember that Isaiah had said, "Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist and faithfulness the girdle of his loins."

John continues,

correspond with the character he manifested." That attitude betrays a tremendous ignorance of the truth. Truth is always ruthless. It does not tolerate error:

The phone book is ruthless in its refusal to tolerate error. It does not give a list of names and tell you your own number. You must call exactly the number that is listed. If you get the digits wrong, you will not reach the person you are trying to reach.

The IRS is very ruthless and narrow-minded about the truth. They do not tell you to guess how much you owe and let them know. No, they insist that you give them exact figures. They even check up on you if you do not put it all down, you will get a phone call that scares the living daylights out of you. They are quite intolerant about it.

What this world needs more than anything else, if I may say so, is someone who will rule with a firm hand and someone who will mean what he says. We seem to be afflicted with a plethora of mealy-mouthed and gutless bureaucrats who refuse to face up to issues. We have just been treated to a view of pussyfooting around the issues of debt repayment and tax reform. They will not do anything about these critical things until they are forced to because they are unwilling to face the unpleasant truth. What a tremendous joy to know there is coming One who will do what he says. You can count on it. Oh, how we need iron men who mean what they say and back up their words with deeds!

Somebody asked me this morning, "If pro is the opposite of con, what is the opposite of progress?" My answer, of course, is, "Congress." But I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies. As Will Rogers said, "We ought to be grateful that we don't get as much government as we pay for!" What a tremendous relief there is someone coming who is going to rule the earth in righteousness and faithfulness.

"The rod of his mouth" is the Word of God, specifically the word of the cross, the cross of Jesus. He ruthlessly puts to death the old self in us. It has been said that if Jesus went into any peace conference he could settle the world's problems with just three little words: "Love your enemies." Everyone knows that is the right way. If we would love our enemies, as he tells us to do, we could end the arms race, destroy our dependence on death and fulfill all the dreams of these sincere peace demonstrators who long for peace but do not know how to achieve it. Why can't we do that? We know why. There is something in all of us that becomes a rod of iron when we are attacked, that makes us want to strike back and get even. It is what produces the blood of murder, war, and pillage that are repeated from century to century in the history of man. Our Lord Jesus Christ died to death by the Word of the Cross.

What good is a doctor who tells you that your cancer does not matter? You want a surgeon with a scalpel and a sharp knife to cut it out and get rid of it. That is what Isaiah is promising. There is coming One who will deal earnestly, honestly, and thoroughly with the evil of man. That is why he is coming to "smite the wicked."

What does this lead to? Isaiah looks further on, beyond the trouble that we are headed for -- recorded in the book of Revelation and other places. He sees there is coming a wholly different scene, which he describes in this way:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall feed;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. {Isa 11:6-9 RSV}

What a beautiful picture! Here is the time when the dreams of men will be fulfilled, when all the lo reflect themselves in peace demonstrations and cries for disarmament will find their fulfillment. Th hunger in mankind for this kind of a world, although we do not know how to achieve it. But there One who does know how. Then, even the animals will lose their ferocity and lie down one with an would you mothers feel if you found your child playing with a cobra? But there is coming a time w happen, when the animals shall lose their ferocity against one another, when the lion shall eat str ox."

Some people ask, "Is this literal or is it only symbolic! Is this all metaphor?" Some commentators s picture of the work of Christ in human hearts today. I believe that. I believe this is metaphor, pict peace.

I think of our church elders in those terms. One of them is like a lion; he roars every time you cro Another one is like a great bear; he swallows you up as you come into contact with him. Another i leopard -- sneaky. We even had one named Wolfe. And here was I, a meek lamb in the midst of the elders' meetings sometimes give that impression, but when we would look to the Lord he comes a great lion tamer. Then the lion lies down with the lamb, the wolf and the leopard dwell together everything works out. This is what our Lord has power to do in human hearts today. He can heal and bring peace among men.

But I also believe this is literal. There is coming a day when the curse will be removed from the ea sings about a day when creation shall be released form its bondage, calling it the day of "the man the sons of God," {Rom 8:19 KJV}. Then the curse will be removed and the whole earth will break verdant blooming, the like of which we have never seen; when "the desert shall blossom like the r Isaiah describes it in Chapter 35. The animals lose their ferocity and even the carnivores return to as in the unfallen creation.

There are other changes as well. In the rest of this chapter and Chapter 12, four times Isaiah use "in that day," Verse 10:

In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign [a banner, a symbol] to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious. {Isa 11:10 RSV}

That summarizes all the predictions about the restoration of Jerusalem as the center of the earth. Jesus shall reign in person in Jerusalem. He himself is the banner which the nations shall seek, "a dwellings shall be glorious." It is the millennial Temple and the redeemed city.

In Verse 11 there is another use of the phrase "in that day":

In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, {Isa 11:11a RSV}

The first time was when he called them out of Egypt. Some think this "second time" is referring to Babylonian captivity, but when the Israelites came back from Babylon they were still not an indepe people. This will be a time when they shall be in their own land as their own rulers. But they will b remnant." That word always means believers. Some people ask today, "Is the present return of Isr fulfillment of these verses? Is God now calling back his outcasts?" It sounds that way for if you r says they shall come,

... from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar,
from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.
He will raise an ensign for the nations,
and will assemble the outcasts of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah
from the four corners of the earth.
The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart,

and those who harass Judah shall be cut off;
Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,
and Judah shall not harass Ephraim. {Isa 11:11b-13 RSV}

That is, the division between the ten tribes in the north and the two in the south will be healed and they will be at peace in their own land. Is the present return that? No, clearly not. This passage is talking about the people who are gathered back; the believing "remnant" of the people. Only a mere handful of believing Jews returned in our day. Most of them are not even religious. Israel today is a secular state, though it is not for it to be there as a preparation for these days, it is not the fulfillment of these verses. Nor is it the will of God that has brought them back from the far-flung nations of the earth as will happen in that day.

When they come, they shall overcome their enemies. Verse 14:

But they shall swoop down upon the shoulder of the Philistines in the west,
and together they shall plunder the people of the east.
They shall put forth their hand against Edom and Moab,
and the Ammonites shall obey them. {Isa 11:14 RSV}

Moab, Edom and the Ammonites are peculiar nations in the Scripture. They were relatives, yet enemies of Israel. The Edomites are the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob; while Moab and Ammon were descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. Yet although they were related, they were long-term enemies of Israel. Therefore, God said, "You shall not destroy them." He has a future for them as well. Spiritually, it is not an enemy we have within us that is related to us, called "the flesh" in the New Testament.

In that day geographical changes will occur, as well. Verse 15:

The Lord will utterly destroy
the tongue of the sea of Egypt; {Isa 11:15a RSV}

This week I read a scientific article about the tectonic plates upon which Asia and Africa are located, and they are now shifting. The scientists are predicting that they will drift apart in places and come together in other places. The "tongue of the sea" is the Gulf of Suez which, according to this, shall disappear; it shall be literally cut off.

and He will wave his hand over the River; {Isa 11:15b RSV}

I think that is the Jordan, though some take it to be the Euphrates. When Israel came out of Egypt, they passed through the Red Sea, through the Gulf of Suez, and also passed through the Jordan River.

he will wave his hand over the River
with his scorching wind,
and smite it into seven channels
that men may cross dryshod.
And there will be a highway from Assyria [that is the present country of Iraq]
for the remnant which is left of his people,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from the land of Egypt. {Isa 11:15b-16 RSV}

There are some physical changes coming in that section of the world, which is located in the Rift Valley. It is one of the great natural gaps in the crust of the earth. Massive earthquakes are bound to happen in that area. The book of Revelation describes.

Chapter 12 has two more references to "that day" This is still part of the same vision as in Chapter 11.

You will say in that day:
"I will give thanks to thee, O Lord,
for though thou wast angry with me,
thy anger turned away,
and thou didst comfort me." {Isa 12:1 RSV}

This is the song of the redeemed of Israel, now restored to the Lord's mercies,

"Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation." {Isa 12:2 RSV}

What a marvelous picture of a relationship yet to come for Israel! The first part concludes with the

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. {Isa 12:3 RSV}

Immediately we are reminded of Jesus' words to the woman at the well of Samaria: "If you believe I can draw from me living water and you will never thirst again," {cf, John 4:7-15}. It is a picture of the emotional strength we need from the Lord. But what is to be fulfilled when we draw from the Lord the emotional strength we need. But what is to be fulfilled when we draw from the Lord the emotional strength we need. But what is to be fulfilled when we draw from the Lord the emotional strength we need.

For protection from harm,
And all sudden alarm,
For provision for need,
For His Spirit to lead,
For each moment I live,
I have Jesus.

He will never depart,
I have Jesus.
To meet Satan's dart,
I have Jesus.
He holds my weak hand,
And gives strength to stand,
He pours from His Throne,
Plenteous grace for his own,
So I sing and I praise
Precious Jesus!

"How great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Prayer:

Our gracious Father, we thank you for these amazing words from this ancient book. How accurately they picture One who has come to mean more than all else to us. We thank you the confirmation of the Spirit to our own hearts that these words can be fulfilled in us as we pray for the members of the nation of Israel today. We know that there lies ahead for them, and for all the nations of earth, dark and troubled days, terrible days. Yet it leads at to the fulfillment of these gracious words, when even the animals shall lose their enmity or with another and lie down together, and a little child shall lead them. Grant to us that we discover the reality of these words in our own personal lives, as we feed upon the bread of life and draw water from the wells of salvation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: What's Coming Down?
By: Ray C. Stedman
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WHY DO THE NATIONS RAGE?

by Ray C. Stedman

The opening words of Psalm 2 pose a question that has baffled mankind through the centuries. It asks, "Why do the nations rage?" That is, why is it so difficult to bring about international peace? thousands of peace conferences held through the centuries, are we no closer to world peace?

In the 60's, the Burmese statesman U Thant, who was then Secretary-General of the United Nations, convened an international conference to try to discover a way to world peace and to help resolve international conflicts of that day. Some 1600 delegates from 42 different countries assembled in

- What element is lacking so that with all our skill and all our knowledge we still find ourselves in a dark valley of discord and enmity?
- What is it that inhibits us from going forward together to enjoy the fruits of human endeavor and to reap the harvest of human experience?
- Why is it that, for all our professed ideals, our hopes and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective, seen only dimly through the storms and turmoils of our present difficulties?

Here is an honest cry of frustration and bafflement from the heart of a statesman wrestling with the question "Why do the nations rage?"

That question is answered many times in the Scriptures, but notably here in this section of Isaiah with Chapter 13. In these chapters the prophet is given a vision concerning the great world power that surrounded Israel in that day. The prophecy begins with a word concerning Babylon; then focuses on Moab, Egypt, Edom and other nations; and ends in Chapter 23 with the burden of the city-nation.

These messages were wholly predictive when they were uttered. They point out things that are going to happen from Isaiah's time onward. As we look back on history we can see that much of this prophecy has already been fulfilled. One of the secrets of understanding Old Testament prophecy is to separate the historical from the yet still future. These nations are not only historic but are symbols of forces at work in every age and generation. What makes this passage so real and valuable to us is that through the experience of others we begin to understand our own personal struggles.

I wish I could cover these passages in detail, but I must move rather rapidly. Chapters 13 and 14 describe the city of Babylon; "the burden of Babylon," or, "the oracle concerning Babylon," as it is in the RSV. When Isaiah wrote this, Babylon was not yet a world power but only a small city on the banks of the Euphrates River. It would not come into world prominence for 200 years after Isaiah. What the prophet is describing is not the rise of Babylon as a great city and world power, but the fall of the empire. The chapter is written in beautiful poetic language with a description of an army assaulting the gates of the city, and the soldiers of the Lord come from God to enter its gates and capture the city. This is historically fulfilled in Chapter 5 of the Book of Daniel. There is recorded the story of the conquering of Babylon under its king, Belshazzar. During a banquet feast which the king gave in the palace he brought out the vessels from the temple in Jerusalem and indulged in riotous debauchery. A supernatural hand appeared and wrote on the wall, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Uzarshadin," meaning, "Your kingdom has been numbered and divided among the Medes and Persians."

That very night Darius the Mede took the city, just as Isaiah predicts.

I will call your attention only to certain verses in this section.

In Verse 6 the prophet says:

israel is a temple of the Lord

For the stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark at its rising
and the moon will not shed its light.
I will punish the world **[not just the Earth but the World]** evil,
and the wicked for their iniquity;
I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant,
and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless.
I will make men more rare than fine gold,
and mankind than the gold of Ophir.
Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,
and the earth will be shaken out of its place,
at the wrath of the Lord of hosts
in the day of his fierce anger. {Isa 13:9-13 RSV}

Many times in the Old Testament prophets you will find a description of "the terrible day of the Lord" a day yet future, described in the book of Revelation under the symbol of the trumpets and the vials of judgment that are poured out upon the earth. One of the signs of "that day" is this prediction, repeated many times in Scripture, that the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. In the 24th chapter of Matthew our Lord himself spoke of a time when "the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give light, and the stars will fall from the heavens," {cf, Matt 24:29}. Then shall be the great tribulation which has been long predicted in the Scriptures. This is what we have here in Isaiah.

In Verse 14 through to the end of the chapter, the prophet returns to the historic destruction of the

The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations." {Rev 17:4-5 RSV}

The opening two verses of Chapter 18 give the fate of this woman:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor. And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird; {Rev 18:1-2 RSV}

The reason that Isaiah's translators cannot translate these names of animals (or whatever they are) are really names of demonic beings. From these names we see confirmation of the biblical use of a symbol of spiritual evil.

Babylon gets its name from the Tower of Babel, which means "confusion." That is where God confused the languages of earth. That tower was built by people who said, "Come, let us make a name for ourselves. We will build a tower that reaches unto heaven," {cf, Gen 11:4}. Thus, all through the Scriptures, Babylon becomes a symbol of the use of false religion to gain earthly prestige and prominence. Babylon is present with us today.

The cults are Babylonish in that sense. They distort the true faith to gain an earthly following, to gain and prestige among men. Babylonianism is formed in every church to some degree, Protestant, Catholic, whatever. The fall of Babylon as an earthly city did not mean the end of Babylonianism. The error goes on. That gives us a hint as to how these great visions of Isaiah are to be treated.

It is not surprising that Chapter 14, which continues the vision of Babylon, opens with a description of the nation Israel at rest in its own land, free from captivity, and master of its own destiny.

The Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land, and aliens will join them and will cleave to the house of Jacob. And the peoples will take them and bring them to their place, and the house of Israel will possess them in the Lord's land as male and female slaves; they will take captive those who were their captors, and rule over those who oppressed them. {Isa 14:1-2 RSV}

This is not a description of the return from Babylon, recorded in the prophecies of Malachi and Haggai, because Israel was still a vassal of Babylon. This prophecy looks on to the end, when Israel will be in its land under its own Messiah. He will lead them as they move out against their enemies to gain dominion among the nations of the earth. Then they will rejoice in their freedom and break forth into song, and their records,

When the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: {Isa 14:3a RSV}

[The last king of Babylon was Belshazzar, but the words of this song indicate that this king is more than an earthly king. Clearly, Verse 12 and following describe a supernatural figure who, in the invisible world, is behind the earthly kingdom of Babylon. These words are very significant:]

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! ~~literally~~ "O Lucifer, Lightbearer" How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down

to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit." {Isa 14:12-15 RSV}

We are here looking at what has been called, in theology, "the fall of Satan." Lucifer, the brightest

his boasts are false. {Isa 16:6 RSV}

Moab was a relative of Israel, born of incest. The sordid story is related in Genesis {Gen 19:29-38} Abraham's nephew, lay with two of his daughters and from that was born two sons, Moab and Ammon (the nations that make up the present country of Jordan). Moab lived on the edges of the land of Israel and did not inhabit the land. According to several passages in the book of Numbers {Num 22-24}, the king of Moab, Balak, once hired Balaam, the false prophet, to teach the people of Israel to do two things: to worship idols and to commit fornication. Moab forever stands in Scripture as a picture of religious worldliness, love of wealth and luxury and regards sexual immorality with an easy tolerance that becomes at times arrogant insolence. There is much of Moab in the church today.

Verse 10 of Chapter 16 describes the fate of Moab:

And joy and gladness are taken away
from the fruitful field;
and in the vineyards no songs are sung,
no shouts are raised;
no treader treads out wine in the presses;
the vintage shout is hushed. {Isa 16:10 RSV}

The zest and gladness of life has disappeared from Moab. Coldness, emptiness and meaninglessness have taken over. This is the fate of all who yield to sexual immorality, carried on under a religious guise. Jade and boredom-that is the last word concerning Moab.

Two verses in Chapter 17 describe the future of Damascus, a city much in the news today.

An oracle concerning Damascus.
Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city,
and will become a heap of ruins.
Her cities will be deserted for ever;
they will be for flocks,
which will lie down, and none will make them afraid. {Isa 17:1-2 RSV}

That has not yet been fulfilled. The infallible Word of God says that Damascus, a large and very old city, ultimately will be destroyed. We are not told how or when this will happen but it will happen, as the Lord God declares.

Chapter 18 has fascinated many who adopt a superficial approach to Scripture and see in it a reference to the United States.

Ah, land of whirring wings [literally, "overshadowing wings"]
which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia;
which sends ambassadors by the Nile,
in vessels of papyrus upon the waters!
Go, you swift messengers,
to a nation, tall and smooth,
to a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering,
whose land the rivers divide. {Isa 18:1-2 RSV}

Some say the "land of overshadowing wings" is a reference to the American eagle, the symbol of the United States. It is described as "a nation tall and smooth [they do not have beards] ... whose land the rivers divide." These interpreters say that, since Isaiah did not know of the western world, he could only describe the "land of overshadowing wings" as "beyond the rivers of Ethiopia," i.e. to the west of Ethiopia and is a reference to the new world, present day United States. This illustrates the ease with which such prophecies can be misused and misapplied.

Actually, as I have pointed out before, Hebrew is a difficult language to translate because many Hebrew words can be taken in various ways. A careful comparison of the words used here as they are used elsewhere

Old Testament, results in an almost entirely different translation.

In the first place, the word that is translated "Ethiopia" is the word "Cush." The ancient name of Ethiopia was Cush, but the problem is, there are two Cushes in the Bible. One is in Africa, which we identify as Ethiopia with the Nile River as its great river. There was another Cush, however, in Asia, north of Palestine, at the headwaters of the Euphrates. That Cush would be identified with Assyria, and the great river, the Tigris, of it was the Euphrates. So that this "land of overshadowing wings," which is "beyond the rivers" (the Nile on one side, the Euphrates on the other) would be a land that protects or in some way intimidates another nation.

Adopting that translation, the area of the globe referred to would be the Gentile powers of earth. "overshadow" by a covenant, a treaty of protection, with a nation which is described as "a nation smooth." "A people feared from its beginning" is a better translation. It is also "a nation under the judgment, literally, under the judgment of God, a disciplined nation, a nation chastised by God, "whose land the rivers [the Nile and the Euphrates] divide" among themselves.

Historically this describes the nation of Israel. Caught between the great superpowers of the day, crisscrossing it often, this nation has been divided between these great powers. But in the end there will be a covenant made with it (we read of this in the book of Daniel), and that covenant will be with the Gentile nations of the world of that day. The result will be an invasion (which Ezekiel describes) from the north that will eventuate in the destruction of the great world powers (called by Ezekiel Gog and Magog) in the mountains of Israel. There is a reference to that in Verse 6 of Isaiah 18:

They shall all of them be left
to the birds of prey of the mountains
and to the beasts of the earth.
And the birds of prey will summer upon them,
and all the beasts of the earth will winter upon them. {Isa 18:6 RSV}

But the last word is that there will be a final restoration. Verse 7:

At that time gifts will be brought to the Lord of hosts
from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide,
to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts. {Isa 18:7-8 RSV}

Again, this is a picture of the restoration of Israel to its land and the tribute of the Gentile nations.

The first fifteen verses of Chapter 19, "the burden of Egypt," have been already fulfilled. But beginning in Verse 16, there is an amazing prediction of a coming change in Egypt. This will take place in six stages, the first of which is introduced by the phrase "in that day." That phrase always carries us forward to the future. Have you ever wondered why Egypt is the only Arab nation to have signed a peace treaty with Israel? Is Israel herself in jeopardy with the rest of the Arab world as a result? Perhaps the reason for that is given in this passage. Ultimately, according to this passage, Egypt will become a believing nation and will be one with Israel and Assyria in the last days.

The first of the six changes is found in Verse 16:

In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand
which the Lord of hosts shakes over them. And the land of Judah will become a terror to
the Egyptians; every one to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the purpose which
the Lord of hosts has purposed against them. {Isa 19:16 RSV}

Egypt seems to be the first of the nations who, following the return of the Messiah to Israel, recognize that God is with his people and begins to fear what he will do by means of a nation that has been restored to blessing. The land of Judah will cause Egypt to fear.

Then the second stage comes:

In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt which speak the language of Canaan [Hebrew] and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun, the ancient city of Heliopolis, the Greek form of the words "the City of the Sun." {Isa 19:18 RSV}

You can visit Heliopolis today. It is a beautiful, but still unbelieving, city. But "in that day" it will be five cities which will have turned to Israel so totally that its inhabitants will actually speak the Hebrew language.

Verse 19 introduces a third step in Egypt's transformation:

In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. {Isa 19:19 RSV}

That passage has been interpreted as referring to the Great Pyramid of Egypt. (Several cults look to the Pyramid as a kind of a prophetic monument, whose dimensions stand for certain numbers of years. Rosicrucians here in San Jose have much to say along this line about the Great Pyramid.) But this cannot be a reference to the Great Pyramid. First, the passage refers to an altar, while the pyramid is built as a tomb. Secondly, the pyramid was already in existence when Isaiah wrote these words, while the altar that will come into existence "in that day." The pillar, of course, is a reference to the pillar that Jacob set up after his vision of God at the city of Bethel. Thus the altar and the pillar are a sign of Egypt's conversion to God. They simply speak of a Gentile recognition of the God of Israel and the fact that Egyptians begin to worship God.

Verse 20 confirms this:

It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. {Isa 19:20 RSV}

Then there is another step of change:

And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the name of the Lord. {Isa 19:24 RSV}

Chapter 20 returns to the historic fulfillment of Egypt's judgment. Chapters 21 and 22 give additional oracles on Babylon under the title, "the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea," the desert of the sea. Here also are given the judgment of Dumah, which is Edom, and a brief word on the judgment of Arabia, which we cannot take in detail now. Chapter 22 describes Jerusalem under the name of "the vision" and predicts its chastisement.

The final burden in this section calls upon Tarshish, the colony of Tyre, and Egypt and Sidon to bear the desolation of the Lord upon this city. The prophet inquires why this is coming to pass, asking in Verse 8:

Who has purposed this
against Tyre, the bestower of crowns,
whose merchants were princes,
whose traders were the honored of the earth? [The answer comes:]

have strength to say no to these and to walk in faithfulness before you. In Jesus' name.
Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman
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Message No: 5
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THE BLACK HOLES OF LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

I saw Halley's Comet this week. I thought I had better see it since I will not be here when it comes again. It was not too impressive. As I observed it through binoculars, it seemed to be nothing more than a bright star with a little tail. But seeing it reminded me of the wonders that have been discovered in recent years as they have been able to go beyond the earth's atmosphere to see things they could not see before. One of those marvels is what has been called the "Black Holes" of space. These strange phenomena are referred to as the "sewers" of space because they seem to swallow up stars. Even whole galaxies can be pulled into them and disappear. Astronomers have surmised that "Black Holes" are huge, incredibly dense stars.

the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed the laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched,
and few men are left. {Isa 24:1-6 RSV}

Further word of this devastation is given later in the chapter.

The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is rent asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.
The earth staggers like a drunken man,
it sways like a hut;
its transgression lies heavy upon it,
and it falls, and will not rise again.
On that day the Lord will punish
the host of heaven, in heaven [that is the devil and all his angels]
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.
They will be gathered together
as prisoners in a [a bottomless pit]
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after many days they will be punished. {Isa 24:19-22 RSV}

Most obviously that parallels what the book of Revelation says.

In Isaiah 25 the prophet looks beyond this time to the new heavens and the new earth.

And he [God] will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations [the veil of blindness to truth] will swallow up
death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of
his people he will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might
save us." This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his
salvation." {Isa 25:7-9RSV}

What a beautiful picture that is, in contrast to the first.

Chapters 26 and 27 return to the terrible time of judgment coming on the earth. We will not take
these, though I urge you to read them through at your leisure.

Beginning with Chapter 28 the prophet introduces a series of six "woes." These are like stop signs
of some danger that lies ahead.

The word "woe" does not necessarily mean "You're going to get it." It really means "Beware, watch
are about to be drawn into a black hole of destruction." While these "woes" focus primarily upon
Jerusalem (picturing the time of trouble that awaits Israel before her hour of deliverance comes) I
remember that the Apostle Paul tells us that all these things that happened to Israel are "written
instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come," {1 Cor 10:11b RSV}. What is literal and
to Israel is a picture of the spiritual peril we face in our own lives. If we are not careful we too
into a time of terrible destruction. (I do not have time to develop the literal application to Israel, so
solely on the spiritual application to our own lives.)

The first "woe" is found in Chapter 28.

Woe to the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim,
and to the fading flower of its glorious beauty,
which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine!
Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;
like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,
like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters,
he will cast down to the earth with violence.
The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim
will be trodden under foot; {Isa 28:1-3 RSV}

This is further described in Verse 7:

These also reel with wine
and stagger with strong drink;
the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink,
they are confused with wine,
they stagger with strong drink;
they err in vision,
they stumble in giving judgment.
For all tables are full of vomit,
no place is without filthiness. {Isa 28:7-8 RSV}

At first glance these terrible words seem to describe the danger of alcoholism, picturing the ultimate which one who has given himself to strong drink can be drawn. This is in line with many other Scriptures which warn about intoxication, drug abuse, or anything that takes over the body and the mind. But this is figurative language, primarily. This "woe" is pronounced on Samaria, the chief city of the tribe of Ephraim and the capital of northern Israel, which stood like a crown, on a hill above fertile valleys. It is a picture of the moral condition of the inhabitants of Samaria. History tells us that these people were given over to the pursuit of earthly pleasures; they lived for luxury.

This, then, is a warning against loving the good life so much that it becomes the chief aim of life. This lifestyle produces a paralysis of the spirit. People become dull and apathetic. They stagger about like the men, finally giving themselves over to shameful filth and debauchery. This is a description, then, of uncontrolled self-pleasing -- the "self-actualization" we hear so much of today. The New Testament warns us not to love the things of this world, but to love God. In the times when "men shall be lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God," {2 Tim 3:4 RSV}. This is what Isaiah is warning about. He raises a "Danger Ahead" sign. Woe to those who go this route.

This is a great peril to spiritually-minded people. Do you sometimes catch yourself wanting more of the luxuries of life, thinking constantly of a new car, a new house, of climbing the corporate ladder, etc. Yesterday's Hippie (who wanted to drop out of life) has become today's Yuppie, who is trying to get ahead of the material values of life as he can. We are surrounded with this here in Silicon Valley. We are besieged by appeals to accumulate the "good things of life." The advent of the California lottery has produced television scenes of people participating in the "big spin." There is a new fever seeming to possess people. They spend their hard-earned dollars on lottery tickets, hoping they will be the one in five million who will be made rich beyond their wildest dreams. This is the spirit of our age. There is great danger in it. This "woe" is about. Beware! Watch out! You are being sucked into something that can be spiritually destructive.

With each of these warnings, a way of escape is given. This is always the way of Scripture. Here in Chapter 28, Verses 9-10:

"Whom will he [God] teach knowledge,
and to whom will he explain the message?
Those who are weaned from the milk,
those taken from the breast?
For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,

line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little." {Isa 28:9-10 RSV}

That is a beautiful description of how the Bible is written. Unlike theological books, there is not a sin, another on heaven, another on angels, etc. The Bible mixes it all together, interspersing one to another, so that a balanced approach to life is given, "precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little."

This verse sets forth the way to avoid being trapped by the seductive lure of the good life. Study. Read what God says. Look at life as he sees it. See through the allurements of the television commercials. Remember the words of Paul in Romans 12: "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed (Romans 12:2a KJV). Let your thinking be changed. Let the word of truth transform your view of life so that life as it really is. That is the way of deliverance.

Our Lord Jesus put it very beautifully in one verse in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek ye first the God and his righteousness, and [then] all these things will be added unto you," {Matt 6:33 KJV}. Most Christians have reversed that, giving themselves continually to efforts to get ahead, forgetting that we should put first the things of God. Forget about status symbols and accumulation of wealth. Seek godliness. Do not concern yourself with being a righteous man or woman right where you are. The promise is that if you trust you with the things of wealth. All these things that "the Gentiles seek after," Jesus said, "can be added safely to you," {cf, Matt 6:32}.

A second "woe" opens Chapter 29. Your version may say "Ho," but it is really the same word in Hebrew.

Ho [Woe to] Ariel, Ariel,
the city where David encamped!
Add year to year;
let the feasts run their round.
Yet I will distress Ariel,
and there shall be moaning and lamentation,
and she shall be to me like an Ariel.
And I will encamp against you round about,
and will besiege you with towers
and I will raise siege works against you.
Then deep from the earth you shall speak,
from low in the dust your words shall come;
your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost,
and your speech shall whisper out of the dust. {Isa 29:1-4 RSV}

Ariel is another name for Jerusalem ("the city where David encamped"). The word means "the Lion" or another meaning is, "the altar of God." As is the case with Hebrew words, both meanings apply. It was intended of God to have been a lion and an altar to the nations of the earth. A lion is a symbol of authority while an altar is the symbol of moral cleansing. The nation Israel was to have spoken to the world with authority gained through the cleansing of God.

But what has Jerusalem and Israel become instead? We get a very vivid description of it in Verses 13-14 of this same chapter:

And the Lord said:
"Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote;
therefore, behold, I will again
do marvelous things with this people,
wonderful and marvelous;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid." {Isa 29:13-14 RSV}

Israel's problem was what we would call "mechanical religion," meaningless, external conformity to the performance of religious things. This is a grave danger. When you feel yourself becoming dull spiritless, it is a warning sign that says, "Watch out! You are headed for trouble." This happens to all of us on occasion. It is healthy to ask yourself at times, "Have I lost my zest for God? Do I sing the hymns mechanically?"

not far ahead.

among many to such wrong advice. Young people are told, "Sex is only natural. Go for it." This is the world that has taken over the schools and most of public life. But that is worldly counsel which is from the world. Businessmen are told that lying, cheating and sharp business practices are all right. Business is the way the world is. But that too is from Egypt, the counsel of the world.

What should one do? The answer comes in the opening words of Chapter 32, which is part of the book of Isaiah.

Behold, a king will reign in righteousness,
and princes will rule in justice. {Isa 32:1 RSV}

What you need is a King in your life, the Lord himself who will rule in righteousness and justice. You need to find, then find,

Each [man] will be like a hiding place from the wind,
a covert from the tempest,
like streams of water in a dry place,
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.
Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed,
and the ears of those who hear will hear.
The mind of the rash will have good judgment,
and the tongue of the stammerers will speak readily and distinctly. {Isa 32:2-4 RSV}

What a difference it makes if you have a King in your life! The Lord himself will be to you like a "hiding place from the wind, like streams of water in a dry place." This beautifully describes the refreshment of the soul that comes to those who, while walking in the midst of life and not trying to run away from it, feed themselves with the strength and beauty of the Lord their God. How wonderfully this describes the escape from the danger of a misplaced confidence.

The final "woe" is found in Chapter 33.

Woe to you, destroyer,
who yourself have not been destroyed;
you treacherous one,
with whom none has dealt treacherously!
When you have ceased to destroy,
you will be destroyed;
and when you have made an end of dealing treacherously,
you will be dealt with treacherously. {Isa 33:1 RSV}

This "woe" is different than the others in that it is not pronounced upon Judah, Jerusalem, or Israel, but upon its enemies, specifically upon the nation Assyria. It is not, therefore, a chastisement of a loving Father, but just retribution of an angry Judge. The evil that is punished here is treachery, unwarranted attack.

Christians can be guilty of this too. In our bulletin this morning there is a poignant plea for prayer from someone who says, "I can't control my tongue. I have a habit of lashing out at people. I hurt and I have a critical spirit." A failure to judge ourselves and a tendency to attack others is frequently found among Christians.

You can be a victim of that kind of attack as well. In either case, when we ask "What can we do?" the answer is given in Verse 2:

O Lord, be gracious to us; we wait for thee.
Be our arm every morning,
our salvation in the time of trouble. {Isa 33:2 RSV}

This is a prayer from the heart. As we sang a few moments ago, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" {Matt 6:13, Luke 11:4}, is a prayer that ought to be on our lips every day. The prayer, "Be our arm every morning," depicts a spirit that is aware of its fatal tendencies and asks God for help daily in the morning.

they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing,
with everlasting joy upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. {Isa 35:8-10 RSV}

Those beautiful words will be literally fulfilled to Israel in the day of their return to the Messiah. But describe the heritage of believers right now.

Our inheritance is peace, love and joy. Inwardly we are to have those no matter what the world a

becomes Israel's prime enemy. This occurs in the reign of Hezekiah, a godly king of Israel, who is confronted with three attacks that most Christians will confront at one time or another. Hezekiah faced an armed attack by Assyria; he suffered a dangerous illness; and he faced a subtle threat from the armies of Babylon. Let us see what we can learn from these three circumstances.

The first attack on the king is found in Chapter 36.

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. And the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field. And there came out to him Eliakim the son of Hezekiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder. {Isa 36:1-3 RSV}

This invasion was the final thrust of the Assyrians to take control of Judah, immortalized in Lord Byron's poem,

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
His cohorts were gleaming with purple and gold.

He may very well have been referring to the prophecies which Isaiah had already made concerning attack. In any event he is here claiming God's support for his attack upon Judah.

Here we have a vivid picture of the world's attack upon a believer. Assyria, as we have already no picture of the violence and the anger of the world directed against faith. You perhaps have experie

Isaiah supplies that answer to the king.

When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, "Say to your master, 'Thus says the Lord: Do not be afraid because of the words you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor, and return to his own land; and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.'" {Isa 37:5-7 RSV}

Isaiah's word points out to Hezekiah that the king of Assyria had not just attacked Judah but had attacked Jehovah. He had reviled God, and this was God's battle. This is the continual reminder of Scripture, "The battle is the Lord's." We are but an instrument in it. The attack we suffer is not so much directed against us; it is against God; thus with patience and with faith we can wait for God to carry on his own battle. What happens here, as we read in the next verses.

The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah [a city of

Word comes back immediately from Isaiah. In a beautiful poetic description (Verses 22-29), the prophet presents before us God's view of the king of Assyria and his threat to the nation. Jehovah points out the pride and arrogance of Assyria, but says that the nation is still in his control: he alone permits it to act one way or the other. There is a clear promise of removal.

Finally there is a detailed description of deliverance. Verse 33:

"Therefore says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city, or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, says the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." {Isa 37:33-35 RSV}

Not for Hezekiah's sake would God save the city, but for his own sake and for the promises he made to David.

God accomplished this by means of one of the most remarkable miracles of history. Verse 36:

And the angel of the Lord went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, these were all dead bodies. {Isa 37:36 RSV}

The King James Version puts that rather quaintly: "and when they arose early in the morning, behold they were all dead corpses." Scripture says an angel of the Lord came into the camp, while history says a battle broke out and this vast army perished in one night. That is how it looks to the historians, but beholders can discern the invisible hand of God directing the affairs of men.

Notice how God's promise was fulfilled exactly as Isaiah had delivered it.

Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went home and dwelt at Nineveh. And as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sherezer, his sons, slew him with the sword, and escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esar-haddon his son reigned in his stead. {Isa 37:37-38 RSV}

All took place as the God of history had ordained.

Chapters 38 and 39 set out two more tests of Hezekiah's faith, the first of which was a personal trial that he suffered. The chronology of these events is important. An investigation of them reveals that this occurred in the midst of the Assyrian invasion, and thus is part of that deliverance which God brought to Hezekiah.

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. 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, you shall not recover." Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the Lord, and said, "Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in thy sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. {Isa 38:1-3 RSV}

A careful look at the chronology reveals that Hezekiah was only 39 years old at this point. Verse 30 records, after the fact, how he felt during his illness. He begins by describing his sense of despair:

to the house of David. Hezekiah, a son of David, is here in the spotlight of God's concern, and God to adjust the forces of nature to encourage his faith. Now we learn of the embassy from Babylon

At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. {Isa 39:1 RSV}

When Hezekiah received a letter from the king of Assyria he handled the threat by spreading it before the Lord in the house of the Lord. But when he now receives a letter from Babylon -- a flattering letter, and with it -- Hezekiah acts very differently.

And Hezekiah welcomed them; and he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them. {Isa 39:2 RSV}

Taken in by the flattery of Babylon, the king trusted these ambassadors despite the fact that Isaiah was very clearly of the threat from that quarter: what Babylon represented in spiritual terms, and what his ultimate fate would be. But the king ignored Isaiah's words, as many today ignore the clear warnings in Scripture.

So Isaiah pays another visit to Hezekiah. The old prophet says to the king, "I see you have had visitors, were these men?" "Oh," replies Hezekiah, "they are ambassadors from Babylon, the great power to the east. This superpower has recognized our tiny kingdom, and that makes me feel proud and honored." David had shown the letter to his wife, exclaiming, "Look, dear, the king of Babylon has now taken note of us." Asked by Isaiah what he had shown these ambassadors, Hezekiah replied, "I showed them everything we've got -- all our treasures, all our defenses, everything." Isaiah goes on to give a prediction of what would come from the king's foolishness.

"Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: "Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who are born to you, shall be taken away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." {Isa 39:5b-7 RSV}

Hezekiah's whining response to this terrible prophecy follows: "Well, the word of the Lord is good, but God it will not happen in my day, at any rate."

What this is meant to teach us, of course, is that prosperity is a greater threat than adversity. W

lives. Rather, we ought to take offers of prosperity and blessing and spread these before the Lord, and let his wise words in evaluating what we are being offered.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for the clear glimpse of the wisdom of your word regarding threats to our lives. Help us to remember that we have an enemy who can come openly, with blatant attack upon our faith, ridiculing and insulting us; or he can come with blandishments and allurements in what seems an offer of greater prosperity, better conditions, or more honor. Grant to us the wisdom to evaluate such threats, to judge what is right and wrong. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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WHO IS LIKE OUR GOD?

by Ray C. Stedman

If you are familiar with Handel's Messiah, you will surely hear the music of that great oratorio going through your head as we read the verses of the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. Handel chose the first verses of this chapter for the opening chorus of Messiah.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins. {Isa 40:1-2 RSV}

In a musical overture, the themes of the piece to follow are all presented in brief form. That is why these first eleven verses of Chapter 40, as Isaiah introduces the chapters to follow. It is noteworthy that the first emphasis is this wonderful word of forgiveness to Israel. The prophet seems to be carried forward to the occasion of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. He is told to announce to the disobedient that the basis for their forgiveness has already been accomplished. He is to speak to the heart of the nation (that is what the word "tenderly" means), "and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, and that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

That last phrase, "double for all her sins," does not mean that God has punished the nation twice as many sins required. This is a reference to an Eastern custom. If a man owed a debt he could not pay, his creditor would write the amount of the debt on a paper and nail it to the front door of the man's house so that every passing would see that here was a man who had not paid his debts. But if someone paid the debt, the creditor would double the paper over and nail it to the door as a testimony that the debt had been paid. This beautiful picture therefore is the announcement to Israel as a nation that in the death and resurrection of her Messiah her debt has been fully paid.

Today, too, Jew and Gentile alike are given the same wonderful announcement concerning our sins.

great declaration in Second Corinthians 5, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation," {2 Cor 5:19 RSV}. The gospel -- the good news. There may be someone here this morning who feels burdened about the wrong things he has done, or the hurt he or she has caused. To you this wondrous word of grace and reconciliation is directed. All that is needed is to confess your sinfulness and believe that God will forgive and borne your sins. "Your iniquity is pardoned, you have received from the Lord 'the doubling' for all your sins."

In these eleven verses, three voices are heard. We have heard the first, announcing forgiveness. The second voice is introduced in Verses 3-5:

A voice cries:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." {Isa 40:3-5 RSV}

We need not be in doubt as to whose voice this is, for the gospels record that this is what John the forerunner of the Lord, declared about himself. John announced that he was the fulfillment of this prophecy. The gospel of John records that a delegation from Jerusalem inquired of John, "Who are you?" {John 1:19 KJV}. The account states, "He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ [the Messiah] {cf, John 1:20}. And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" {John 1:21a RSV}. He said, "I am not."

straight." In the gospels we read that Zacchaeus paid back fourfold all the money he had stolen from the poor. Our deviousness will be corrected. We will steal no more; we will report our income properly.

Ah, but it is more than that, as we see in Verses 6-8. It is as well. What is man? "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field." All the great things we boast about will go away and disappear. All man's knowledge and power will amount to nothing. "The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; ... but the word of our God will stand for ever."

And again in Verse 25:

To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One. {Isa 40:25 RSV}

What other god is there that you can trust, and how does the true God compare to him? This section is one of the most majestic and superb language about God found in Scripture.

Listen to these words in Verse 12:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance? {Isa 40:12 RSV}

Here God himself is asking man, "Can you do what I do?"

Can you hold the waters of earth in the hollow of your hand?" I stood on the beach at San Diego on a gorgeous day throughout all of California, watching the great combers coming in from the Pacific. I watched those great billows crashing on the sand I thought of the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, thousands upon thousands of miles to the west. These words came to my mind, "Who has measured the waters and held them in the hollow of his hand?" God himself in majesty and greatness controls all of earth.

Verses 13 and 14 speak of God's incredible wisdom.

Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,
or as his counselor has instructed him?
Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
and who taught him the path of justice,
and taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding? {Isa 40:13-14 RSV}

Who could do that? Well, many attempt to. I confess there have been times when I have been confronted with a difficult problem which I analyzed and thought I had solved. Then I have come to God and told him my next step what he could do to work out the problem -- only to find, to my utter astonishment, that he had completely ignored my approach and did nothing about it. I have become a little irritated over this. I have said to God, "Lord, even I can see how to work this out. Surely you ought to be able to understand." But as time went on and remained, and a whole new situation came to light, I realized that God saw far more than I could see. I knew of obstacles I had no knowledge of, complexities that touched the lives of hundreds of people working out purposes that would go on not only for the moment, but on and on into one generation after another; that his solution ultimately was the best one. I had to say, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 11:33, "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" {Rom 11:33 RSV}.

In Verses 15 to 17, God compares himself with the proud nations of earth.

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as the dust on the scales;
behold, he takes up the isles like fine dust. [Isaiah, "the isles" are a reference to the continents, the great land masses, washed by the sea.]
Lebanon [the forests of Lebanon] would not suffice for fuel,
nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering.
All the nations are as nothing before him,
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. {Isa 40:15-17 RSV}

How feeble seem the boasts of men, the leaders of the nations, with their claims to glory and might when compared with the greatness, the majesty and the strength of God himself. They are nothing absolutely nothing.

God concludes this section with a word to those who feel forgotten and neglected. Verse 27:

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hid from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God?" {Isa 40:27 RSV}

Have you ever felt that God does not notice you, that he has no concern about your affairs? Have you felt neglected, forgotten, and thought that God does not care about you? We all feel this way at times. What is God's answer to this.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary,
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted. [Watch the Super Bowl today and you will see it happen.]
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. {Isa 40:28-31 RSV}

How many thousands through the centuries have taken those promises literally and found that to "wait on the Lord" does this very thing. It all hinges on that word "wait". The hardest word to learn in the Hebrew language for some, especially young people. Wait. Let God work. The Hebrew word has a note of expectancy about it: expect God to work, wait in expectation that God will move. It takes time, you cannot have it overnight, but they that wait upon the Lord shall find their own strength renewed. They shall find themselves mounting up like the eagle in its flight, their souls able to run the gamut of emotions. They shall not be weary. And they shall walk (in body) and not faint.

Chapter 41 picks up these themes (as do all these subsequent chapters), and repeats them again. This chapter deals with Israel's trust in the idols of Babylon. Some 100 years after Isaiah uttered this prophecy, Israel was taken captive and carried off to Babylon. There, amidst the idolatries and deceitfulness of the city, the people were tempted to worship the false gods of that city. Here, God, through the prophet, promises also to deliver them. He speaks of one from the East whom he is going to raise up to do this.

saying to you, "You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you off"; {Isa 41:8-9 RSV}

Here is a remarkable promise to Israel, that even though they turn their backs on God, even though they wander off in unbelief and fall into the trap of worshipping the idols around them, nevertheless God will not cast them off. The Apostle Paul picks up that argument in Romans 9, 10 and 11, and asks the question, "Has God rejected his people?" {Rom 11:1 RSV}. His answer is, "Absolutely not." God has a future for Israel. That is why the nation exists today still in unbelief. But God promises to deliver them some day.

All of this has its counterpart in our own lives. Even though we turn our backs on God, even though we wander off in rebellion and hurtful, hateful submission to the idols that men follow today, God does not abandon us. He works in our lives to bring us back.

In a remarkable passage, Verses 21-24 of Chapter 41, God challenges these idols of men to prove themselves.

Set forth your case, says the Lord;
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
Let them bring them, and tell us
what is to happen.
Tell us the former things, what they are,
that we may consider them,
that we may know their outcome; {Isa 41:21-22a RSV}

God is challenging the idols. "Go back over history and tell us what its meaning is. Tell us how things have come into the present from out of the past, if you are as smart as you say."

or declare to us the things to ~~come~~ [predict the future]
Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods;
do good, or do harm **[Do something!]**
that we may be dismayed and terrified. {Isa 41:22b-23 RSV}

A word of contempt follows:

Behold, you are nothing,
and your work is naught;
an abomination is he who chooses you. {Isa 41:24 RSV}

What a withering, sarcastic description of the idols in which men trust.

Do we have idols today? At our staff meeting last week, Rich Carlson, our college pastor, reported the findings on all the campuses that students are living in fear. They are afraid to get a job, afraid to get into the modern world, afraid of failure. They live in constant fear that they are not going to measure up, or somehow achieve all they want out of life. Even Christian students are not trusting the Lord, but are trusting the system. They do not see him in charge of life. In their eyes "the system," the powers that be, the company, the sex drive, the urge to climb the corporate ladder; these are in charge of men's affairs.

These are the gods that the world constantly worships, the gods of every generation -- ambition, pleasure, comfort. But what do they offer really? Can they explain the past? Can they predict the future? A couple of days ago I addressed people some of whom are among the foremost men of industry and business. I found that among them and their contemporaries many have arrived at the place where they have always wanted but they do not want anything they have. They feel life is empty and meaningless. This is what idols do to those who worship them.

We need to read these closing words of Chapter 41, where God says:

But when I look there is no one;

among these there is no counselor
who, when I ask, gives an answer.
Behold, they are all a delusion;
their works are nothing;
their molten images are empty wind. {Isa 41:28-29 RSV}

That is all the idols of man can deliver!

Chapter 42 begins the unveiling of the suffering Servant of Jehovah. Increasingly he will come to throughout this last section, until at last, in Chapter 53, we find the sun of Messianic revelation

Behold, my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights,
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not fail or be discouraged till
he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law. {Isa42:1-4 RSV}

Jewish commentators claim that this Servant is a reference to the nation Israel. They base their view on the passage we just read in Chapter 41, Verse 9, "You whom I took from the ends of the earth, and from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off.'" This refers to Israel. The Jewish commentators reject the claims of Christians that these verses in Chapter 42 refer to Jesus, claiming that it is only the nation that is the servant of Jehovah.

How do we respond to that? I do not think we can ever understand this whole section of Isaiah unless we see the close connection of the nation of Israel with its Messiah. God sees them as one. In fact, "The Servant of Jehovah" is always Israel; we must admit that. But sometimes that servant is viewed as the whole nation, as is the case in the land of Israel right now. The new nation of Israel is not a new nation. It is made up largely of scoffers and atheists, skeptics who have little time for even their own Scriptures.

The mass of the nation is unbelieving now. Oftentimes it is portrayed this way in the prophets, as in Verse 19 of Chapter 42:

Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf as my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind as my dedicated one,
or blind as the servant of the Lord? {Isa 42:19 RSV}

These references do envision the whole disobedient nation in its unbelief. There are other verses that envision the nation as the believing remnant, the tiny body of Jews who still truly believe their Old Testament Scriptures and who worship the Lord with their whole heart. They, too, are called "the servant of Jehovah." And as in this case the phrase is concentrated in the one person of the Messiah, who is the essence of the nation, why Jesus said, "Salvation is of the Jews." He would bring salvation to the world, but he was a Jew, and he was seen as the very essence of the nation itself.

We have this in these first four verses of chapter 42.

Behold, my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights; {Isa 42:1a RSV}

Here God gives the characteristics of the servant. He will be Spirit-filled:

I have put my Spirit upon him, {Isa 42:1b RSV}

This happened to Jesus at his baptism, when the Spirit descended upon him like a dove.

He will be unassuming and obscure.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street; {Isa 42:2 RSV}

Jesus did not go about loudly proclaiming himself, trying to gain a following. He conducted himself in an unassuming manner, teaching the truth, which attracted great numbers of people to him.

He would be patient and gentle:

a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; {Isa 42:3a RSV}

Wherever there is evidence of faith, he will encourage it. Wherever there is a little strength, he will help it. He will never turn away those with but little faith.

he will faithfully bring forth justice. {Isa 42:3b RSV}

Then finally, he will be persistent, and ultimately successful.

He will not fail or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law. {Isa 42:4 RSV}

All this clearly applies to our Lord.

The chapter goes on to describe God's controversy with Israel in its unbelief. And this present section concludes in the opening words of Chapter 43 with a promise of ultimate redemption.

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. {Isa 43:1-3a RSV}

This is the explanation of why the nation of the Jews, subjected to the most terrible tortures known, including the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, have survived and still remain a nation on the earth. "When you pass through the fire, you will not be consumed."

These verses, of course, apply to our hearts in a spiritual way. How many thousands have rested on the promise, that God would sustain them through times of stress. I like to call this "God's program of spiritual management." What a marvelous promise: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."

Then God speaks even more intimately,

Because you are precious in my eyes,

and honored, and I love you,
I give men in return for you,
peoples in exchange for your life.
Fear not, for I am with you; {Isa 43:4-5a RSV}

This is God's repeated promise. It is the answer to all our fears.

Then comes the promise of ultimate gathering:

I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, Give up,
and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
every one who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made. {Isa 43:5b-7 RSV}

What superb language! How majestically it describes the power of God and his intention to carry out his plan in human history!

Many ask if the present return of Jews from the nations to the land of Israel is the fulfillment of the promise. The answer is clearly, "No." They have come back in unbelief they have not been brought back by the power of God. Jesus himself said that when he returns, all those on the earth "...will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet sound, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other," {cf, Matt 24:30-31}

This is the promise that is described here.

I close with but one more reference, in Verses 10-11:

"You are my witnesses," says the Lord,
"and my servant whom I have chosen,
that you may know and believe me

Title: Who is Like our God
By: Ray C. Stedman
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GOD OF SPACE AND TIME

by Ray C. Stedman

Our nation was stunned and shocked at the deaths of seven astronauts at Cape Canaveral on Tuesday. We could not help but think that the tragedy confirmed much of what we have been learning in Isaiah, especially his words from last week, "All flesh is but grass, and its beauty as the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever," {cf, Isa 40:6-8}. James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, who does not change like the shadows of a man's life is but a vapor which appears for a little while and then vanishes away," {cf, Jas 4:14}. Certain things were dramatically illustrated in the shuttle tragedy. One moment the astronauts were with us, smiling and waving, and the next moment they were gone, vanished from the earth.

This tragedy has had a sobering impact on our nation because, in some ways, space travel has been our proudest achievement. We were hit right where we felt most confident and successful. I hope it has had a humbling effect upon our people. Pride is the great enemy of mankind, yet it is one of our commonest feelings.

The Word of God warns against pride because it cuts us off from the grace and goodness that God can give. Isaiah warns that a prideful man can never obtain anything from God. God gives only to those who recognize their need. This is exemplified in our Lord's opening words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3}.

There is a beautiful promise contained in Chapter 44 of Isaiah to which we come today. The chapter begins with these wonderful words, spoken by God through the prophet:

"But now hear, O Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!
Thus says the Lord who made you,
who formed you from the womb and will help you:
Fear not, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants,
and my blessing on your offspring." {Isa 44:1-3 RSV}

Here is pictured the refreshment of spirit that God gives to those who are thirsty, those who recognize the dryness of their lives and who come to him for supply. Notice that the promise extends even to the future. Here is a great word for families: God will bless them if they take the place of suppliant need before him.

As we have already seen many times in Isaiah, all this is to be ultimately true of the nation of Israel. God will never steal these promises away from the Jews. God will fulfill them literally one of these days. But the promise is also applicable to those who, by faith in Jesus Christ, have become sons and daughters of Abraham. The promises, that God will pour water on the thirsty, and streams on the dry ground, are made to us. This is one of the most remarkable paradoxes in the Scripture. What man could ever devise a plan that if you fail, you win, if you lose, you will succeed, if you are broken, you will be lifted up? But that is God's way.

He always deals realistically with us. He will not force us to be humiliated, but he wants us to face the picture. He is totally honest. He knows exactly who we are and what our problem is. The folly of him is that he seeks to smooth that over and to pretend to be something he is not. All this is remarkable proof that the Bible is a divine Book, for no man would ever come up with a program for success that starts with an admission of failure.

A couple of weeks ago my wife and I were in Palm Springs, sharing in a ministry with Dr. Lewis Smedes, a professor from Fuller Seminary. He went to the Los Angeles county jail one day to spend a few hours with some of the prisoners there with their spiritual problems. As he was eating alone in the cafeteria he met a man, a lawyer, who spends a whole day each week helping prisoners in the county jail. But he does not use his legal expertise to counsel them. He sought instead to help by reading the Scriptures to them, aiding them in spiritual matters. (In order to help in that he wore a clerical collar.) Dr. Smedes said to him, "Don't you find it rather depressing, working with these losers all the time?" The man replied, "I do not see them that way. To me there are only two kinds of people in the world: the forgiven and the unforgiven. The men and women are locked up physically. You can find a key, open the door and let them out, but I have found the key that opens their inner life except God." That is a beautiful expression of what Isaiah is saying. If you are locked up inside yourself, prisoner to your own pride and self-sufficiency, God can open the door and let you out. This is what he promises to do and has done for centuries.

The prophet goes on to give God's disclosure of the kind of God he is.

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
"I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.
Who is like me? Let him proclaim it,
let him declare and set it forth before me.
Who has announced from of old the things to come?
Let them tell us what is yet to be.
Fear not, nor be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
And you are my witnesses!
Is there a God besides me?
There is no Rock; I know not any" {Isa 44:6-8 RSV}

Critics of the Bible sometimes complain that God is constantly bragging about himself. But this is not bragging. It is simply declaring reality. It is an attempt on God's part to save his creatures from the danger of following false gods. The passage goes on to describe the stupidity of the idol worship the Israelites were falling into. The prophet describes a metal smith who melts metal, pours it into a mold to make an idol of it, and in the process he becomes tired. Isaiah points out what a ridiculous thing it is that he makes a god who has no power to help him even while he is making it. Then he describes a carpenter who carves the figure of a man out of a block of wood, then uses the chips that he has carved off the wood to make a fire to warm himself. He then bows down and worships the idol, seeking deliverance from some danger that his own hands have made. What a ridiculous concept!

When we read a passage like this we are tempted to say, "Surely this does not apply to us. We are not idol worshippers." But we are really not that far removed from this kind of practice. As I drive down highways on Sunday mornings I often notice people out in their yards worshipping a shiny, bright, metal idol. They pour expensive fluids into it, polish and shine it, and bow down before it. Have you ever noticed the chaos that comes over them when they get into it and take off down the street? Mild, inoffensive people, who are usually a word in anger, blast out of their driveways, leaving a trail of rubber as they depart, transformed into a different person by the illusion of power. We worship the automobile, which has become the symbol of luxury, beauty and power.

Silicon Valley is one of the great idol-manufacturing areas of the world, shipping out computers, televisions, and machines with their flashing lights and weird symbols, to the worshipers of knowledge in the far corners of the earth. Many today worship the god of sex, thinking that sex will satisfy them and fulfill their desires. But the god of sex will not deliver them. It is true we do not have idols of wood and stone any longer.

behind them remain the central idols of the American people.

The prophet declares of the idolater, Verse 20:

He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" {Isa 44:20 RSV}

The folly of worshipping any god other than the true God is that people deceive themselves. They are dissatisfied, feeling they have been feeding on ashes. The soul, as well as the body, needs food that which satisfies. But those who look for satisfaction in drugs or sex discover that they have been feeding on ashes. They have been deceived, failing to recognize that there is "a lie in their right hand." The idol is the symbol of what you grasp, what you look for help from. But those who follow idols are un-

This is anticipating the seventy years of captivity in Babylon and God's promise to raise and restore even naming the one who will do this.

who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd,
and he shall fulfill all my purpose";
saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,'
and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid. [ignore the chapter division here and read right on.]

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped, {Isa 44:28-45:1a RSV}

God calls Cyrus his "anointed," which is the word "Messiah." He does so because Cyrus would be instrument to deliver Israel from Babylonian captivity. Cyrus prefigures the great Deliverer who was to come, God's true Messiah, who would fulfill these words in an even greater way. The prophecy goes on to say that God says to Cyrus,

"I will go before you
and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze" {Isa 45:2a RSV}

That is a reference to the gates of the city of Babylon. Cyrus conquered the city by diverting the Euphrates River, which flowed under the gates protecting the city, so that his army marched into the city in the night.

God says to Cyrus, Verse 4:

For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.
I am the Lord, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I gird you, though you do not know me. {Isa 45:4-5 RSV}

This is one of the most remarkable confirmations that God is the God of history. He is in control, whether we know it or not. He regulates the affairs of nations and takes full responsibility for all that they ultimately do, even though they do not recognize this. What an encouragement this ought to be to us when we see the mighty of earth strutting about in vain ambition, making great promises of what they are capable of. Let us recognize that they only can do what God says they can do. Here God uses a king who does not know him to be his instrument to deliver Israel.

God gives another very important word in Verse 7:

I form light and create darkness. {Isa 45:7a RSV}

Seen in that light, how shall we evaluate the proud boasts of men that they are in control of their fate? God takes that up in the very next passage, at Verse 9, Chapter 45:

"Woe to him who strives with his Maker,
as an earthen vessel with the potter!
Does the clay say to him who fashions it, "What are you making?"
or "Your work has no handles?" {Isa 45:9 RSV}

It would be ridiculous if clay were to say to the potter, "I don't like the way you're doing this. This does not appeal to me at all." Listen to the irony of this passage.

Woe to him who says to a father, "What are you begetting?"
or to a woman, "With what are you in travail?" [as though these events were under human direction.]
Thus says the Lord,
the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker:
"Will you question me about my children,
or command me concerning the work of my hands?
I made the earth,
and created man upon it;
it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,
and I commanded all their host." {Isa 45:10-12 RSV}

This is the God with whom we have to deal. How incredibly arrogant of man to criticize the work of God like that! This passage is designed to humble man in his proud confidence and to show him how dependent he is upon the God whom he dares to criticize. C.S. Lewis well has said, "To argue with God is to argue with oneself."

seeing a lonely boy sitting in the back, the deacon (who could not speak very well) addressed him and said, "Young man, look unto God and he will save you." Spurgeon said, "I looked, and I was saved." He went on to become one of the great preachers of the English church.

But this is the out which God offers to mankind: "Look to me." Do not look to science, or to technology. These are fine in themselves, they give certain creature comforts, but they cannot deliver you. They cannot satisfy you or meet your need. If you pursue them they will turn to ashes. God is the only Deliverer from human hurt and failure.

We can move quickly through Chapters 46, 47, and 48, because they deal with the same subject: the fall of Babylon. The idols of Babylon are judged in Chapter 46. We are told that these idols must be broken about, but God promises to carry us. Look at this word in Verses 3-4, Chapter 46:

Hearken to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am He,
and to gray hairs I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save. {Isa 46:3-4 RSV}

That is a promise that is getting very precious to me, addressed as it is to "gray hairs." The Lord carries us even into old age. The wisest question you can ever ask yourself is, "Does my God carry me, or do I carry it? Is it ultimately myself that I am looking to for help, for strength, and for inner peace, or does God supply that?" That is the question God raises and answers many times through this passage.

In Chapter 47 the prophet looks beyond historic Babylon to mystery Babylon, referred to in the book of Revelation; that strange combination of religious powers which in the last days challenges the truth of God, and, as Revelation describes, is the source of all occult practices. Look at these verses:

Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries,
with which you have labored from your youth;
perhaps you may be able to succeed, [this is rich sarcasm]
perhaps you may inspire terror.
You are wearied with your many counsels;
let them stand forth and save you,
those who divide the heavens,
who gaze at the stars,
who at the new moons
predict what shall befall you. {Isa 47:12-13 RSV}

Here is God's view of astrology and horoscopes, all such attempts to rely upon the stars as a guide.

Behold, they are like stubble,
the fire consumes them;
they cannot deliver themselves
from the power of the flame.
No coal for warming oneself is this,
no fire to sit before! {Isa 47:14 RSV}

They are absolutely useless when it comes to truly directing life.

The section closes in Chapter 48 with a wonderful appeal again from God.

Thus says the Lord,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
"I am the Lord your God,

who teaches you to profit,
who leads you in the way you should go.
O that you would hearken to my commandments!
Then your peace would have been like a river,
and your righteousness like the waves of the sea;
your offspring would have been like the sand,
and your descendants like its grains;
their name would never be cut off
or destroyed from before me." {Isa 48:17-19 RSV}

Many times (like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem), God bewails the fact that men in their obstinacy come to him and be set free.

The chapter and the section close with this revealing word:

"There is no peace," says the Lord,
"for the wicked." {Isa 48:22 RSV}

The wicked are not necessarily murderers and criminals. They are anyone who has any god other than God. God is Lord of his own earth and heaven. He is the One to whom we must look for life, liberty, and peace. Yet men turn their backs on this God who can supply all they need, and walk off into restless lack of peace.

In this context, I often think of a cartoon I once saw of a little boy who had put some of his beloved toys in a scarf, tied them on a stock, put them over his shoulder, and kept walking around and around the block. A policeman who saw him go around several times said to him, "Son, what are you doing?" The boy replied, "I'm running away from home." The policeman said, "Why are you just going around the block?" The boy replied, "Because I'm not permitted to cross the street." How many people wander restlessly around the same course, seeking something new, something different, but they are not permitted to cross the street. Ultimately there is nothing left for them but to go back into the house. When they do, they find not a harsh Judge but a loving Father who says,

"Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn,
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
a word that shall not return:" {Isa 45:22-23a RSV}

Here is something as inevitable as anything in all of life. This is a solemn word of God.

'To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear.'
Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me,
are righteousness and strength. {Isa 45:23b-24a RSV}

Paul picks up these words in the book of Philippians and says they are true of Jesus. He is the One who fulfills this. Because of his obedience unto the death on the cross,

God has exalted him and has given to him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {cf, Phil 2:9-11}

It is our privilege to do that now, when confessing his name means salvation. Ultimately the whole world will confess it, but then it will merely be an admission that he was what he claimed to be. Till then, there is peace to the wicked."

If someone here is seeking peace, may I urge these words upon you. These are not empty promises.

means this. He does speak peace to a troubled heart, to those who feel empty, lonely, miserable and God offers to "pour out water upon those that are thirsty and streams upon the dry ground."

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for this precious promise to us. How beautifully it has been fulfilled in so many lives present here, and through all the ages of time. We pray if any here among us are looking for peace that they will turn to you. May we who already have come and know you recognize how foolish it is to trust in anything else but your presence in our lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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BEHOLD THE MESSIAH

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Romans opens with the Apostle Paul's statement that he was "called to be an apostle of the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the

for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength -- " {Isa 49:1-5 RSV}

It is not hard to see in that section the events our Lord fulfilled in the days of his flesh. This passage is addressed to the Gentile peoples of earth, reaching far beyond Israel to the "coastlands," the corners of the earth. The first declaration is that the Savior's name was given to him before he was born: "from my mother he named my name." When Mary was found with child, an angel visited Joseph and told him the holy issue to be born of Mary was to be called, Jesus. In Verses 2-3 the servant describes himself as one taught of God, and yet taught in obscurity. Growing up in that carpenter's shop in Nazareth, our Lord knew the radical truth that would be like "a sharp sword." But he learned it in obscurity, hidden away like "a quiver," as he describes it here. Yet during those times, he was made aware of what God had called him to do. "He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'" This, of course, became our objective as he moved into his ministry upon reaching manhood.

Verses 4-5 speak of his experience of rejection by the people to whom he came. At first his ministry was sensational. He attracted crowds everywhere he went. But soon he began to experience rejection and failure, so that in the end he had to say, "All have forsaken me." This is reflected in these words, "I labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Even in those words, however, there is confidence that God will recover and do his will: "Yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." He clearly understood that God would fulfill through him the work he had sent him to do, which he says is, that he might "bring Jacob back to him." He came to reach the wandering, disobedient people of Israel and to bring it back to God.

In this section we can see that both the nation and the servant are called Israel "Israel, my servant." They are clearly distinguished. This is the answer to those, particularly among the Jews, who say this is referring to a man but to the nation only. Clearly both figures are reflected here.

Verses 8-13 continue the description of what God has called his servant to do. There is a remarkable statement in Verse 6, where he looks on to the worldwide ministry that the Servant will have.

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Thus says the Lord,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the servant of rulers:
"Kings shall see thee and arise;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." {Isa 49:6-7 RSV}

Here is a ministry that reaches far beyond the land of Israel going out to all the nations. Though in the end he would be despised, in other nations kings would acknowledge his authority. This has been fulfilled many times in history. Queen Victoria declared that she viewed herself as a servant at the feet of the King and Lord of Lords. Napoleon and other leaders of history had great things to say about Jesus. Through history many leaders have humbly acknowledged their dependence upon this amazing Person, so that the words have been adequately fulfilled.

In Verse 14 of this chapter, Israel (or Zion, a name for Jerusalem) cries out,

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me." {Isa 49:14 RSV}

Many Jews feel this way yet today. Frequently you hear them say that while they were the chosen (some admit they still are), yet they feel that God has forsaken them. They cannot understand that through the centuries, the nameless horrors of the Holocaust, and other persecutions.

But Yahweh reminds them, in Verses 15-16:

"Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me." {Isa 49:15-16 RSV}

That is God's word that he will not forget his promises to Israel. Paul takes this up in Chapters 9-11 of Romans, and asks the question, "Has God cast off his people whom he knew?" {cf, Rom 11:2a} The answer is, "Absolutely not." God will fulfill these promises.

Here Jehovah reminds them, "Though you may feel neglected and forgotten, I cannot cast you off. I will not forget you, 'Can a mother forget her sucking child?'" Proverbially, of course, mother love is the strength of all. Many mothers continue to love their children no matter what they do. But it is unfortunately true that many mothers can forget their children. This week the papers were filled with an account of a mother in California who systematically suffocated all nine of her children. Mothers can forget their children, but God cannot. "Behold, I have inscribed you, engraved you on the palms of my hands." We are reminded of that scene in the gospels when Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to his frightened disciples, huddled together in a room, and said to them, "Behold, my hands and my feet and see that it is I," {cf, Luke 24:39}. The marks on his hands were marks of love and their very names were engraved in his hands.

Though this passage is addressed to Israel (Zion) as a nation, we Christians have a right to claim these promises for ourselves. In Hebrews 12 the writer says we believers have not come to Mt. Sinai, a mountain that cannot be touched, to the intolerable sound of the trumpet and the darkness, etc. "But," he says, "we have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem," {Heb 12:22 RSV}. Therefore these promises apply to us on a spiritual level.

This entire section is a great word for discouraged hearts. If you ever feel like God has forgotten you, or that he has turned his back on you? Perhaps you have made mistakes and you think that God is going to punish you for all the rest of your life. In our prayer requests this morning there is an appeal for a man who feels discouraged, defeated. Many people feel that God has totally forgotten them.

I was in Atlanta on Thursday and Friday last, speaking to a group of Southern Baptist pastors. I was encouraged to hear one of them, a preacher of a large Baptist church in Atlanta, say that he had learned that he was preaching to the wrong crowd of people. He thought he was preaching to what he called "America 1," the average family a man and his wife, their two-and-a-half children, driving a Cadillac or a Lincoln, living in a beautiful home on an acre of ground, etc. But he discovered that the group he was really speaking to was what he called "America 2." They live in high-rise apartments, drive Porsches or BMWs, have probably gone through two or three divorces, and their family consists of his, hers and their children. They are leading empty lives, climbing the corporate ladder, feeling the rush and restlessness of life, troubled by many problems and distresses. That is the world of today, here in Silicon Valley too.

But God has a ministry to the discouraged and defeated ones. He will restore and do a work that will amaze and baffle them at the wonders that he produces. Read on at Verse 19, where God says

Surely your waste and your desolate places
and your devastated land --
surely now it will be too narrow for your inhabitants,
and those who swallowed you up will be far away.
The children born in the time of your bereavement
will yet say in your ears:

"The place is too narrow for me;
make room for me to dwell in."
Then you will say in your heart:
"Who has borne me these?
I was bereaved and barren,
exiled and put away,
but who has brought up these?
Behold, I was left alone;
whence then have these come?" {Isa 49:19-21 RSV}

Hear the amazement at the increase of population, the return of prosperity, and the blessing of God on his people! That is the wonder of the gospel. How many here could tell how God has changed their lives, how he has blessed their hearts beyond their dreams. We sang earlier this morning,

Something beautiful,
something good,
All my confusion He understood.
All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife,
But he made something beautiful of my life.

That is the gospel in action. The rest of Chapter 49 describes in beautiful words this promise to his people.

Chapter 50 continues with God's answer to the charge of forgetting him. The opening verse:

Thus says the Lord:
"Where is your mother's bill of divorce,
with which I put her away?
Or which of my creditors is it
to whom I have sold you?" {Isa 50:1a RSV}

Though the people felt like God had forgotten them, divorced them, and cast them off, God says, "Where is your bill of divorce? Where is a bill of sale to these people whom I have allegedly sold you?" They cannot produce it, of course, because it has not happened. But God says to them,

"Behold, for your iniquities you were sold,
and for your transgressions your mother was put away.
Why, when I came, was there no man?
When I called, was there no one to answer?" {Isa 50:1b-2a RSV}

This was the reason for their trouble. It was not God's fault that they were made to wander through the wilderness of earth enduring terrible trials. This verse asks, "Where were you when I came? Why when I called was there no answer?" He is speaking, of course, in foreview, of the ministry of Jesus. I remember that John opens with a statement in the prologue, "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, but the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not," {John 1:10-11} That was true not only of the Jewish world, but the Gentile world as well. He came unto all the world, but through the centuries he has been rejected and not listened to by almost all.

This rejection did not happen because of any lack of power on God's part. It goes on to claim that he has ample power to deliver. The problem is human pride; that obstinate resistance to being helped which is often found in our hearts at times. It is an unwillingness to admit that we need anyone. That is why the gospel is often received by those who have been humbled, those who understand their lack and their need.

But the prophecy does not stop with that. The passage goes on to tell us what God does to overcome this terrible obstacle of pride. How does he deal with this? How does he remove this block? Once again, it is the Servant of Jehovah himself, telling us of his own experience.

The Lord God has given me

the tongue of those who are taught [of one who is taught, of a learner]
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him that is weary.
Morning by morning he wakens,
he wakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious.
I turned not backward.
I gave my back to the smiters,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face
from shame and spitting. {Isa 50:4-6 RSV}

Two remarkable things are described here by the servant. He says, first, "Morning by morning God opened my ear to hear the truth. I listened to my Father." Remember the many times Jesus said in his ministry, "The things that I have heard from my Father." Again and again he made that claim. He had the ear of a learner. He pored over the Scriptures. He saw himself in them. He understood what his work would be. There was dawning into his heart the revelation that he was to endure anguish, pain and rejection. But, as he said, "I was not rebellious. I was willing to go ahead. I gave my back to the smiters and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. I hid not my face from shame and spitting."

It is well for us to remember frequently the sufferings of Jesus, the sheer physical agony that he

if you try to work it all out yourself, if you 'build your own fire' and try to warm yourself by others well, then, you will have to take the inevitable results. You will lie down restless, miserable, unhappy and in torment because that is what that kind of a choice leads to."

Chapters 51 and 52 give specific steps which believers can take when they feel discouraged and need to turn to God. This marvelous section is gathered around two different phrases, "Hearken to me," and "Awake," each of which is repeated three times. These give great insight into God's program for the discouraged.

"Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance,
you who seek the Lord;
look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug. [The next verse tells what these two
figures stand for.]
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for when he was but one I called him,
and I blessed him and made him many. {Isa 51:1-2 RSV}

In other words, if you are discouraged look back to where you have come from! Israel was to look back to Abraham, back to the time before he left Ur of the Chaldees. He had nothing. He was but a rock in a desert place! God called him and gave him everything. Look at Sarah. She was 90 years old before she undertook the labor of childbearing. Yet God multiplied her offspring to become the nation of Israel.

When you are discouraged, look back. You may not be what you want to be, or even what you ought to be, but thank God you are not what you were! Remember Paul's words to the Corinthian believers, "The immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God," {1 Cor 6:9b-10 RSV}. But the apostle continues, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God," {1 Cor 6:11 RSV}. Look back. Has God changed you? Has he altered your inner life and changed your heart? In the words of the old hymn,

Count your blessings.
name them one by one,
And it will surprise you.
what the Lord has done.

Then also look ahead, God says.

"Listen [Hearken] to me, my people,
and give ear to me, my nation;
for a law will go forth from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
My deliverance draws near speedily,
my salvation has gone forth,
and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and they who dwell in it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be for ever,
and my deliverance will never be ended. {Isa 51:4-6 RSV}

Look ahead! A new day is coming! God is at work. We are not headed for darkness and despair, we are headed for peace and light and glory; for power and ministry such as we could never dream. In Se

Corinthians 5 the apostle says, "This light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us an exceeding weight of glory," {cf, 2 Cor 4:17}. That is what lies ahead. We must go through darkness a while, but it will not last forever. Once in a meeting where people were sharing their favorite Bible verses, I heard a man say, "My favorite are those verses that begin, 'And it came to pass. . .' When I face discouragement, I say to myself, 'It didn't come to stay, it came to pass.' " That is what God is saying. It will not last forever. We are headed for light, for peace, and for glory.

Verse 7 adds another "Hearken." Do not only look back and look ahead, also look around!

"Hearken to me, you who know righteousness,
the people in whose heart is my law;
fear not the reproach of men,
and be not dismayed at their revilings.
For the moth will eat them up like a garment,
and the worm will eat them like wool;
but my deliverance will be forever,
and my salvation to all generations." {Isa 51:7-8 RSV}

We were reminded this morning of a threat to Wycliffe Translators in Oklahoma by Marxist professors who are arrogant and callous enemies of the truth. But no one need fear. There is an invisible destruction taking place in their lives. An unseen judgment is already taking place, one which is called here, the judgment of the moth and the worm. Have you ever gone to your closet to pick out and wear a fine woolen garment which has been hanging there, only to find a cloud of moths fly out of it? They had riddled it with holes, and you were completely unaware that anything was going on. That is the picture here the moth and the termite which destroy the foundations. That is why we are told again and again in the Scriptures not to fear the bluster and the cruelty of the cruel and violent people, because God is undermining them. The psalmist says in Psalm 73, "He has made their feet in slippery places," {cf, Psa 73:18}. We ought to feel sorry for them, hollow shells as they are.

because of the fury of the oppressor,
when he sets himself to destroy?" {Isa 51:12-13a RSV}

"I will comfort you," says God, "I will come in my own time. But in the meantime I have a work for you to do." He tells us what that work is in Verse 16:

"And I have put my words in your mouth,
and hid you in the shadow of my hand,
stretching out the heavens
and laying the foundations of the earth,
and saying to Zion, 'You are my people.'" {Isa 51:16 RSV}

God wants to tell others of this wonderful way of deliverance, of the encouragement he has for those who are discouraged of heart. "I have put my words in your mouth," he says, so that we can share with others what he has done for us.

He calls then to Israel to awaken itself.

Rouse yourself, rouse yourself,
stand up O Jerusalem,
you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord
the cup of his wrath,
who have drunk to the dregs
the bowl of staggering. {Isa 51:17 RSV}

Through the rest of the chapter God describes Israel's task, to speak to the nations, to rouse itself to tell the world about God.

There is a third call to "Awake" in Chapter 52, where God again says he will truly bless this nation.

Awake, awake,
put on your strength O Zion;
put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city;
for there shall no more come into you
the uncircumcised and the unclean.
Shake yourself from the dust, arise,
O captive Jerusalem;
loose your bonds from your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion. {Isa 52:1-2 RSV}

What will happen in the earth in the day when Israel recognizes her Messiah? Paul tells us in Romans that the whole world is awaiting that day of discovery. That is reflected here in verse 7:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." {Isa 52:7 RSV}

A few years ago I was in England, preaching in some churches in the London area. I spoke one night in a crowded Methodist chapel, where many were singing the chorus, "Our God Reigns." I was amused to find the song sheet from which the congregation was singing that the typist had made an error in the hymn, and it read, "Our God Resigns"! Many Christians act as if God has resigned. But he has not resigned! This is what we must declare. We must show it on our faces, and let it be heard in our voices. He will come and the terrible times will end. We (and Israel) will one day hear the welcome summons:

Depart, depart, go out the [from the time of trouble]

touch no unclean thing;
go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves,
you who bear the vessels of the Lord. {Isa 52:11 RSV}

That is what is required of Christians today. We are not to go along with all the mistaken ways of chasing illusions, and seeking things that will not satisfy. Rather, we should cleanse ourselves, for the promise is,

For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight,
for the Lord will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard. {Isa 52:12 RSV}

We are so often like the Israelites at the Red Sea: the water before us, Pharaoh's army hard on our heels, we do not know where to turn or what to do. But then the word of the Lord comes, "Stand still, and see the salvation of your God," {cf, Exod 14:13}. That is the way out. Trust in your Lord. He will open a way through the sea.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, you who know us so well, that you can encourage us in the midst of our distress. We are not forsaken, we are not neglected. You have inscribed us in the palm of your hands, and you will not forget your promises to us. Thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: Behold the Messiah
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 49-52
Message No: 10
Catalog No: 585
Date: February 9, 1986

MAN OF SORROWS

by Ray C. Stedman

It has become evident through this prophecy that Someone is coming. That dim and shadowy Figure who appears occasionally in the opening chapters is emerging ever more clearly as we move through the text. Here in the 53rd chapter the Messiah steps out into full and glorious view.

It is hard to understand how anyone can read this great chapter and not see Jesus in it. We have commented on the fact that, through the centuries, Jewish people have held that it does not refer to Jesus of Nazareth, but rather that the nation of Israel is the "Servant of Jehovah." The primary reason for this is that they expected a different kind of Messiah. The Jews had done like many of us do with Scripture: they had selected verses that appealed to them and formulated from them a vision of a Deliverer who would come with military might and power. He would overcome the Roman tyrants, they thought, set Israel free, and fulfill the promises of God to make it the chief of the nations of earth. Because our Lord did not fulfill these promises, they have maintained that this prophecy does not apply to him. Yet here in this great chapter it is clear that God's suffering Servant is brought before us.

The passage actually begins in the closing verses of Chapter 52, which belong with Chapter 53. Together with it, these verses constitute five stanzas that depict various foreviews of the work and life of the Messiah, each one bringing out a different aspect of his work and life. Beginning in Verse 13, Chapter 52,

God himself announcing the presence of the Servant.

Behold, my servant shall prosper,
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
As many were astonished at him --
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the sons of men --
so shall he startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which has not been told them they shall see,
and that which they have not heard they shall understand. {Isa 52:13-15 RSV}

This section, which describes the remarkable impact that the Messiah would make upon mankind, declaration that he would be successful in all that he did: "Behold, my servant shall prosper." That would be accomplished in three specific stages, described here: "He shall be exalted; he shall be lifted up; he shall be very high." Commentators see in this the events that happened to Jesus after the crucifixion.

First, in the words, "He shall be exalted," there is a reference to the resurrection. Jesus was brought back to the dead, stepping into a condition of life that no man had ever entered before. Lazarus had been raised from the dead in a sense, but he merely returned to this earthly life. Jesus, however, became the "firstborn from the dead" (1 Cor 15:20). He was thus exalted to a higher dimension of existence.

Then, "he shall be lifted up." After his resurrection, Jesus took his disciples to the Mount of Olives. As he was speaking to them he ascended into the heavens until a cloud received him out of sight. So he was physically and literally "lifted up."

Thirdly, the passage says, "He shall be very high." The Hebrew puts it rather graphically: "He shall be exalted above every name." We cannot but recall the words of the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Philippians. Speaking of Jesus, he says, "Wherefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father," {Phil 2:9-11}. Thus by his resurrection, his ascension, and his kingly exaltation the Messiah made tremendous impact upon humanity.

Further, it is said of him here that "many were astonished at him." This happened in two different ways. As Verse 14 implies, many were "astonished" at his death: "His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men." This is descriptive of the face of Jesus who endured the terrible Roman scourging, the beatings, the blows to his face with the rod, which the soldiers mockingly called a king's scepter, and the crushing of the crown of thorns upon his head. By the time he was impaled on the cross, his face was a bloody mess. This is what the prophet sees: our Lord's appearance so marred that those who passed by were "astonished" at his visage.

But Verse 15 describes another form of astonishment: "so shall he startle many nations." This refers to the tremendous accomplishments he achieved, not only during his ministry, but through the intervening centuries since. Many have commented on the remarkable achievements of Jesus. Kenneth Scott Latourette, a well-known historian, has said,

As the centuries pass, the evidence is accumulating that, measured by his effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet.

G.K. Chesterton, that remarkable English Christian novelist and literary critic, has written,

There was a man who dwelt in the East centuries ago, and now I cannot look at a sheep or a sparrow, a lily or a cornfield, a raven or a sunset, a vineyard or a mountain without thinking of him. If this be not to be divine, what is it?

Truly, our Lord has made an astonishing impact upon our world. He is the Man who cannot be forgotten.

The first three verses of Chapter 53 describe the Messiah's strange rejection. These words express the repentant nation when at last they recognize him at his return. The prophet cries out as the nation,

Who has believed our report?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. {Isa 53:1-3 RSV}

These remarkable words are felt by any person who comes to Christ and remembers how lightly he looked upon him when he first learned of him. Here the nation asks, "Who has believed our report, that which we have heard. The arm of the Lord was revealed to us, but we did not understand who he was." Looking back we can see how he fulfilled these words.

He grew up before Jehovah as a "young plant." That speaks of the hidden years at Nazareth when the obscurity of the carpenter's shop no one knew who he was except his Heavenly Father. He was "like a root out of dry ground." We have already seen Isaiah's prediction that a root would rise up from the stem of Jesse from whom Joseph and Mary were both descended. But the House of David had fallen on evil day and the royal line had become impoverished and no one recognized its claims to leadership within Israel. When he came he was indeed a root out of very dry ground.

The passage continues, "He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." Again, these are words that refer to our Lord's appearance as he hung upon the cross. He was a pitiful figure to behold, hanging naked, blood covering his face, worn and shattered by suffering. Indeed he had "no beauty that we should desire him."

He was truly "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." There is no record in Scripture that Jesus ever laughed. I think he did laugh, for you cannot read some of his parables, or some of the things he said to his disciples, without sensing a smile on his face or hearing a chuckle in his voice. But there is no account of him ever laughing. He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

We must remember that all through his boyhood, and even into his manhood, he was pursued by the Jews about his birth, inferring that he was an illegitimate son, born to a faithless maiden who had broken her betrothal. His brothers misunderstood him and did not believe in him. They were embarrassed at some of the things he said and did. It was not until after the resurrection that they believed in him. He was called a drunkard and a glutton, and was said to be possessed by a devil. He was called a Samaritan, a dishonorable term. He had no home to go to. He said himself, "Foxes have holes, birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," {Matt 8:20, Luke 9:50}. Sometimes his disciples left him alone to do their business, but he had to go out to the Garden of Gethsemane and sleep alone beneath the olive tree. He became at one point "Public Enemy No. 1." In the weeks before his crucifixion the Pharisees offered a reward to anyone who would turn him in. Surely he was rejected of men! In the words of the Apostle John, "He came unto his own, and his own people received him not," {John 1:11 RSV}.

The next stanza portrays our Lord's substitutionary sacrifice:

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,

he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. {Isa 53:4-6 RSV}

This, of course, is the very heart of the gospel, the good news. Jesus took our place. As Peter put it, "He bore our sins in his own body upon the tree," {cf, 1 Pet 2:24}. He took our sins and paid the price. He had no sins of his own and Scripture is very careful to record the sinlessness of Jesus himself. He was suffering for his own transgressions, but for the sins of others. One writer has put it rather well

It was for me that Jesus died,
For me and a world of men
Just as sinful and just as slow to give back his love again.
And he did not wait until I came to him.
He loved me at my worst.
He needn't ever have died for me
If I could have loved him first.

That is the problem, isn't it? Why do not we love him first? Why is it that we can only learn to love when we have beheld his suffering; his excruciating agony on our behalf? Why is it we find such difficulty in obeying the first commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy strength," {Deut 6:5 KJV}. It is because of our transgressions, as this passage declares. They have been torn off from the divine gift of love that ought to be in every human heart.

Sin is a disease that has afflicted our entire race. We cannot understand the depth of human depravity until we see the awful agony through which our Lord passed; behold the hours of darkness and hear the tormented orphaned cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" {Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34 KJV}. All this spells out for us what we really are like. Most think of ourselves as decent people, good people. We have done, perhaps, some of the terrible things that others have done. But when we see in the cross the depth of evil in our hearts we understand that sin is a disease that has infiltrated our whole lives. Man was created in the image of God and once wore the glory of his manhood, has become bruised and sick and broken, his conscience ruined, his understanding faulty, his will enfeebled. The principle of love and the resolve to do right has been completely undermined in all of us. We know this to be true. Then, this verse comes as the best of news: He was wounded for our transgressions. The bruising was the chastisement that we deserved, but it was laid upon him.

There is no way to read this and fail to see that our Lord is the great divine Substitute for the evil in our heart. We can lay hold of this personally by the honest admission stated in Verse 6: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." How true that is of each of us! Who can do anything else? I grew up in Montana, and I know something about sheep. Sheep are very foolish and willful creatures. They can find a hole in the fence and get out, but they cannot find it to get back in. The shepherd must go and get them every time. How true are the words, "We have turned every one to his own way."

Frank Sinatra made a song popular a few years ago, "I Did It My Way." When you hear that it sounds like something admirable, something everybody ought to emulate. How proud we feel that we did it "our way." But when you turn to the record of the Scripture, you find that that is the problem, not the solution. We are doing things "their way," so we have a race that is in constant conflict, forever striving with one another, unable to work anything out, because we all did it "our way."

The way to lay hold of the redemption of Jesus is to admit that "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way"; and then to believe the next line, "But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." One Christian put his testimony in a rather quaint way. He said, "I stooped down low at the first 'all,' and I stood up straight and came out at the last." Notice that this verse begins and ends with the word "all": "All we like sheep have gone astray." This man said, "I stooped down low and went in a

'all.'" In other words, "I acknowledged that I, too, was part of that crowd that had gone astray." He stood up straight and came out at the last 'all.'" He understood that "The Lord has laid on him the us all." He bore our punishment and took our place.

The next stanza foretells the silent sufferings of Jesus.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the and of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth. {Isa 53:7-9 RSV}

Once again, Scripture preserves carefully the sinlessness of Jesus himself. He was without sin, but he bore the sins of others. That is why he did it in silence. He had no interest in defending himself, so he never spoke in his own defense. It is a striking thing that in the gospel accounts of the trials of Jesus he never spoke in his own behalf or tried to escape the penalty. This amazed both Pilate and Caiaphas. When our Lord stood before the High Priest, he was silent until the High Priest put him on oath to tell them who he was. When he stood before Pilate, he was silent until to remain silent was to deny his very Kingship. Then he spoke bravely, acknowledging who he was. When he was with the soldiers, they smote him and spat him and put a crown of thorns on his head, yet he said not a word. Peter says, "When he was reviled he reviled not again" (1 Pet 2:23). Truly, "As a lamb before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." When he stood before contemptuous, sneering Herod, he stood absolutely silent. He would not say one word to Herod. He returned at last to Pilate because Herod could find nothing wrong with him.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. {Isa 53:6a RSV}

It is very apparent to anyone reading the gospel accounts that the trials that Jesus went through were illegal. The Jewish trial before the High Priest was illegal. It was held at night, which was contrary to the law. Several times he admitted that he could find no wrong in him, and yet he pronounced upon him the sentence of death. How true are these words, "by oppression and judgment he was taken away."

He was "stricken for the transgression of my people." Remember that as the crowd was crying out, "Crucify him, crucify him," they added these significant words, "Let his blood be upon us and upon our children." Thereby they acknowledged that he was indeed "stricken for the transgressions of my people."

But when at last the deed was done and he cried with a loud voice, "It is finished" (John 19:30), the soldiers came to take him down from the cross. No enemy hands touched his body after his death, only the hands of those who loved him. As they removed his bloody body, the dear lips were silent, the wondrous voice was still, the light had gone from his eyes, and the great heart beat no more. But instead of throwing him on a pile of refuse as the authorities intended, they "made his grave with the rich," just as Isaiah had predicted written before the event. Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, offered to put the body of Jesus in his new tomb, which had never been used. Someone has put that rather remarkably, "He who came from a virgin womb, made his grave in a virgin tomb."

Then in the last stanza his ultimate triumph is pictured. Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him for our sakes, to bring him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand; he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great; and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.

Fuchida heard about that change in the life of DeShazer, and Fuchida himself began to read the New Testament. When he came to the story of the crucifixion, he told us that he was so moved by the words that broke from the lips of Jesus as he hung upon the cross with his torturers and tormentors gathered around him, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" {Luke 23:34}, that his own heart broke. He did not understand how anyone could pray for his enemies and ask for them to be forgiven. In that moment, he gave his heart to Christ, and ultimately became a Christian evangelist. For some years he traveled throughout the country, speaking especially to young people about the grace that could come into a life through Christ. He was "numbered with the transgressors . . . and made intercession for them."

This is a love story. What kind of love is this that awakens within us a response of deep and abiding love, a willingness to admit that we need help? Our only adequate response is found in the words of a

Oh, love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee.
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer fuller be.

Title: Man of Sorrows
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 53
Message No: 11
Catalog No: 586
Date: February 16, 1986

be no change in his attitude toward us.

"For this is like the days of Noah to me:
as I swore that the waters of Noah
should no more go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you." {Isa 54:9-10 RSV}

This beautiful language speaks of the assurance of Romans 8:1. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." God treats us no longer as enemies, as pariahs and prodigals, but He disciplines us, he chastens us, yes, but he always loves us and we can count on that love even in times of discipline.

Chapter 55 extends this word of greeting and invitation not only to Israel, but to the whole world.

"Ho, every one who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price." {Isa 55:1 RSV}

What a beautiful invitation! The appeal, of course, is to any who thirst. We humans are so made that we thirst just as much as our bodies do. We thirst to lay hold of life. I have never met anybody who

hammock?" You cannot enjoy a hammock more than an hour or two. Then what? Is that all there is?

This is what this passage brings before us. Why are you working for "that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" I think often of the words of T.S. Eliot,

All our knowledge only brings us closer to our ignorance,
and all our ignorance closer to death.
But closer to death, no nearer to God.

Then he asks the question that hangs over this whole generation:

Where is the life we have lost in living?

That is what God is asking here. Why are you not satisfied with all you are getting? And where do you find satisfaction? God goes on to answer:

"Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in fatness.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David." {Isa 55:2b-3 RSV}

The "everlasting covenant" is God's gift of himself and his love, found in the salvation which our Lord brings. That is the basis for true self-acceptance. The world is forever seeking confidence, self-worth, and expects others to give it to them, but all others can offer is a momentary shot in the arm. The whole of Scripture, however, is that only God can give you an abiding sense of worth, the "everlasting covenant and the sure mercies of David." This is something you can stand on every day: the feeling that you are loved and valuable in the sight of a God who has forgiven your sins and given you grace to live. This is the heart of the gospel.

How do you obtain this? The answer is found in Verse 6:

"Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." {Isa 55:6-7 RSV}

That is the only way; no one has ever found another. Acknowledge your need, your failure, your weakness, and turn to the Lord. Ask of him and he will abundantly pardon!

The text goes on to say:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts." {Isa 55:8-9 RSV}

That is one of the most important verses in the Bible. It declares, God does not work like we do, and we need not be surprised that at times we cannot understand what he is doing. We need not get angry because he does not work the way we work. When man plans something, he thinks of specialized machinery, complex organizations and endless supplies of money. But God does not do that. When he wants to do something, he usually picks some unknown, obscure, forgotten person. He takes what is that are right at hand: a couple of loaves and a few fish will feed multitudes; six water jars filled with water he will turn it into wine; only the jawbone of an ass (that is a comfort to me)! God will use whatever

hand. We do not easily understand how to work with God because he does not work like we do. trying to impose our manmade systems upon him. No wonder his work seems to falter because it work, but ours. But when we learn to work with him how wonderfully he does things.

who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
"I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble,
and to revive the heart of the contrite." {Isa 57:15 RSV}

and not to hide yourself from your own [your own family] {Isa 58:3b-7 RSV}

That is what God is really looking for. All through the Scriptures the emphasis is on the need for r

To help paint your neighbor's basement.
To make benches for the beginners' department.
To call the elevator man by his name.
To be on time for meals.

The acid test is not, "What does my religion do for me?" but, "What does it make me do for others?"

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for these searching words. How well you know who we are and what we are doing. Help our faith to be real, not phony. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: The Time of Rain and Snow
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 54-58
Message No: 12
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Date: February 23, 1986

AND THEN COMES THE END

by Ray C. Stedman

This last section of the book of Isaiah covers the final events of world history, and closely parallels Revelation. As I pointed out when we began this study thirteen weeks ago, the book of Isaiah is in a miniature Bible. It divides like the Bible. The Bible has 66 books, and Isaiah has 66 chapters. The Old Testament has 39 books, and the first division of Isaiah has 39 chapters. The New Testament has 27 books, and the second half of Isaiah has 27 chapters. The theme of the last of Isaiah is the theme of the Bible: the end!

Matthew quotes the words of Jesus, "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached to all the earth, and then the end shall come," {cf, Matt 24:14}. It is that end that Isaiah brings before us in these closing chapters of his prophecy, beginning at Chapter 59. This chapter answers the questions we are asking today, "Why is the world in such a mess? If God is really running this world, why is he doing a poor job of it?" Some feel even they could do a better job.

God's answer to these questions is given in the opening words of chapter 59:

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,
or his ear dull, that it cannot hear. {Isa 59:1} "It is not my failure," God says]
but your iniquities have made a separation
between you and your God,
and your sins have hid his face from you
so that he does not hear.
For your hands are defiled with blood
and your fingers with iniquity;
your lips have spoken lies,
your tongue mutters wickedness. {Isa 59:1-3 RSV}

The problem is not with God, but with man. The passage goes on to describe the wickedness of man, particularly (since this chapter is addressed to the nation), and beyond that, to the whole world. Paul quotes Verses 7-8 in Romans 3 to show that this applies to the whole race of men.

Their feet run to evil,

and they make haste to shed innocent blood;
their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity,
desolation and destruction are in their highways.
[We has been reading the statistics of
carnage on our highways.]
The way of peace they know not,
and there is no justice in their paths. {Isa 59:7-8a RSV}

That is an excellent description of what theologians call "the depravity of man." God says there is wrong with us. It is utter foolishness to deny it.

At the close of World War II, Sir Winston Churchill, a great historian in his own right, penned the

Certain it is that while men are gathering knowledge and power with ever-increasing speed, their virtues and their wisdom have not shown any notable improvement as the centuries have rolled. Under sufficient stress of starvation, terror, warlike passion, or even cold intellectual frenzy, the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds, and his modern woman will back him up.

That eloquently confirms what Isaiah declares.

The problem is not so much the presence of human sin, for God has an answer for that, set forth in Chapter 53 of Isaiah, in the marvelous story of One who was "wounded for our transgressions, for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed." (Isa 53:5). Yes, God has a full answer to the dilemma of human evil, but the problem that separates man from God is an unwillingness to admit to that evil. That is what keeps God from acting on our behalf. If you have a humble, repentant heart, you can get anything from God; but if you come with a self-justifying excuse, you will give you nothing.

Man is strangely reluctant to admit that he is contributing to the problems he faces. People seem to deny the fact that selfish ways and self-centered actions and attitudes are directly connected with the flood of evil that fills our land and fill our newspapers today. It is very difficult to get them to accept the fact that the evil that comes upon mankind because of our wrong attitudes and actions. This is why so much evil about child abuse, wife beating, incest, homosexuality, pornography, and other terrible things. They seem to be incapable of doing anything about these. They only worsen from generation to generation. Churchill has pointed out, there is no improvement as the centuries have rolled by. The reason is that we are unwilling to admit our evil and this is oftentimes true of Christians as well as the world.

At Verse 9 of this chapter, however, there is a dramatic change. A group comes forth who do admit their part in the problem. They are the remnant of Israel, the tiny believing band of Jews who do acknowledge their sins and have gone wrong.

Therefore justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not overtake us;
we look for light, and behold, darkness,
and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.
We grope for the wall like the blind,
we grope like those who have no eyes;
we stumble at noon as in the twilight
among those in full vigor, we are like dead men. {Isa 59:9-10 RSV}

What a strange blindness permeates all of human society today! The confession continues.

We all growl like bears [Does that sound like your house?]
we moan and moan like doves;
we look for justice, but there is none;
for salvation but it is far from us.
For our transgressions are multiplied before thee,
and our sins testify against us;
for our transgressions are with us,

and we know our iniquities:
transgressing, and denying the Lord,

time of earthly glory, when Israel shall be the foremost of the nations. It shall all come to pass, except what is recorded here.

Chapter 61 is a flashback to the days of the Messiah's first appearance. It opens with his own words:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion --
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. {Isa 61:1-3 RSV}

Luke's gospel records that Jesus went into the synagogue at Nazareth on one occasion, as was his custom. He was asked for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled it until he found the place where these words were written. Turning to this very spot, he read this passage about the Spirit coming upon him, anointing him, and how he was called to preach the gospel, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, etc. He stopped reading in the middle of a sentence, after the comma following the words, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he closed the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, sat down, and said, "This day is fulfilled in your hearing."

Note carefully where he stopped reading. He did not go on to read, "and the day of vengeance of our God," because when he first came he introduced "the day of God's favor," the day when God withholds judgment.

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to this as well:

They shall be called the holy people

O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at thy presence --
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil --
to make thy name known to thy adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at thy presence! {Isa 64:1-2 RSV}

They are asking God for judgment, crying, "We know this will be terrible, but it is the only way. So Lord, do your work." Hasn't this been our cry at times, when we have seen the terrible things that are going on around us: "Lord, come and end this terrible scene, at whatever cost"? This, then, is the prayer of the remnant, the earnest pleading for relief. The prayer rises out of an awareness of the majesty and holiness of God, exemplified in their words in verse 4,

From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides ~~thee~~
who works for those who wait for him. {Isa 64:4 RSV}

Paul quotes those verses in First Corinthians {2:9-10}, saying these unrevealed things have been revealed to us by the Spirit. If you want to see God, and know God, then search his Word. Study it, think it through, and let the majesty of God be taught to you by the Spirit of God, for that is what he has come to do.

God replies to all this in Chapters 65 and 66, which close the book of Isaiah. He first reminds Israel that God has always been available to them, if they were only ready to turn to him. He proves this by pointing out that he has been available even to the Gentiles; not only to the chosen people but also even to the Gentiles.

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;
I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here am I, here am I,"
to a nation that did not call on my name. {Isa 65:1 RSV}

He is speaking of the Gentiles. But what about Israel? Of them, he says,

I spread out my hands all the day
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;

and a new earth;
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice for ever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing,
and her people a joy.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and be glad in my people;
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping
and the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not fill out his days,
for the child shall die a hundred years old, {Isa 65:17-20a RSV}

That is, when a child is one hundred years old he is still a mere child. The longevity of the ancient come back again.

and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, {Isa 65:20b-22a RSV}

What a beautiful picture of the restoration of the earth! Isaiah closes with words describing the things that shall occur in the animal kingdom, a description we have already seen in Chapter 11 of this prophetic book.

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
and dust shall be the serpent's food.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain. {Isa 66:25 RSV}

The final chapter continues the dialogue between Jehovah and Israel. The fascinating thing about this chapter is that it is a direct reply to the yearning on the part of many in Israel today to rebuild the temple upon the ruins of the old. {Isa 66:25 ol}

like him who offers swine's blood;
he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense,
like him who blesses an idol.
These have chosen their own ways,
and their soul delights in their abominations." {Isa 66:3 RSV}

We have seen all through this book how God hates phony religion. He hates outward ritual that hinders reality! This will be true of those days as well.

Let me point out one word he utters here to the true believers in Israel. Verse 5,

Hear the word of the Lord,
you who tremble at his word:
"Your brethren who hate you
and cast you out for my name's sake
have said, 'Let the Lord be glorified,
that we may see your joy'; [That is sarcastic language.]
but it is they who shall be put to shame." {Isa 66:5 RSV}

Then the most amazing wonder of all times is unveiled in Verses 7-9:

"Before she was in labor
she gave birth;
before her pain came upon her
she was delivered of a son.
Who has heard such a thing?
Who has seen such things?
Shall a land be born in one day?
Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?
For as soon as Zion was in labor
she brought forth her sons.
Shall I bring to the birth and not cause to bring forth?
says the Lord;
shall I, who cause to bring forth,
shut the womb? says your God." {Isa 66:9 RSV}

What is this all about? The most amazing thing that has happened in human history is that Israel produced a son, Jesus, before she travailed in labor. The great tribulation and the judgment of Israel described in the book of Revelation is the labor of a woman in labor, and yet Israel will come to the realization that nineteen hundred years before she began her labor, she had already had a son! This is the great wonder of the age. God declares that people should not say, "Who has ever heard such a thing, that a nation then 'shall be born in a day.'" When Jesus returns, the nation sees who it is, those who will believe in him will be made righteous and they shall flood the earth with the knowledge of God. Israel shall be God's witnesses in that day.

The closing verses are a final description of the restoration of that nation, and promise anew of the new heavens and the new earth still to come is, those who will believe in :F

