

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week One: Come, Let Us Reason Together (Isaiah 1:1-31)

The prophetic book of Isaiah opens with an extended plea for God's people to return to him. Outwardly they seem to be close to God, but in reality their hearts have drifted from him, and they have lost any awareness of God in their daily lives. Isaiah forthrightly declares what God plans to do, and he appeals to his brothers and sisters to be part of a spiritual rebuilding.

The Historical Setting (Isaiah 1:1)

Isaiah conducted his prophetic ministry over a period of several decades full of tumultuous events. Since a detailed description of this era would take considerable time, we shall usually discuss background events as they become relevant to the text. For now, we shall take a brief overview of this era in Israel's history, and then look at some of the major themes in Isaiah.

Isaiah titles his book as a "vision" (from God) concerning Judah and Jerusalem (1:1). Vision involves sharpness of sight, that is, ability to see things clearly. The prophet does not see things as he wishes them to be, but as they truly are. He also sees things that will be, both 'good' and 'bad'. Isaiah does not daydream or fantasize about God's people; he always tells them the truth.

Isaiah's ministry was in Judah, the southern half of God's people in the divided kingdom era*. It lasted through the reigns of several kings**: Uzziah (or Azariah), faithful for most of his reign but came to a bad end physically and spiritually (2 Kings 15:1-7, 2 Chronicles 26:1-23); Jotham, well-intentioned but often weak (2 Kings 15:32-38, 2 Chron. 27:1-9); Ahaz, a sinful, idolatrous man and an incompetent ruler (2 Kings 16:1-20, 2 Chron. 28:1-27); and Hezekiah, often foolish but humble, and very responsive to God's word (2 Kings 18:1-20:21, 2 Chron. 29:1-32:33)***.

* After Solomon's death in 931 BC, the northern tribes rebelled against his son Rehoboam. They established an independent kingdom with its capital in Samaria, and retained the name Israel. The southern kingdom took the name Judah, after the tribe to which its monarchs belonged.

** From roughly 740-690 BC. The exact dates of the reigns of these kings are difficult to calculate with certainty, in part because the monarchs would sometimes promote their heir as co-regent while the parent monarch was still living, resulting in some years being credited to the reign lengths of both rulers.

*** Isaiah died sometime during the reign of Hezekiah's son, the violent and idolatrous Manasseh. Some ancient non-biblical sources state that Manasseh had Isaiah put to death by sawing him in two.

During Isaiah's ministry, the northern kingdom of Israel fell, conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. While Judah went through a recurring cycle of spiritual decay followed by spiritual reform, followed again by decay, the northern kingdom had begun in idolatry and never changed (except for a brief period of bloody reforms in Jehu's reign). Isaiah's original hearers could thus witness firsthand the fall of their idolatrous brothers to the north, and they could know the reasons for it.

This spring, we shall cover Isaiah 1-27, focusing on the theme, "a remnant will return" (Isaiah 10:21, 10:22). This statement implies that God's people have strayed and must be disciplined. But it also means that, no matter what happens to them as a whole, God will preserve and protect a faithful remnant. In these chapters, prophecies about God's discipline are interspersed with prophetic images of the Messiah, who will bring redemption. Isaiah thus develops a complete picture of the character of God: he is loving and compassionate, yet also pure and righteous.

In summer, we shall study Isaiah 28-49*, with the theme, "the sure foundation for your times" (Isaiah 33:6; see also 28:16). This world is always uncertain and imperfect. Yet in God and his Messiah we have a sure foundation, an assured source of hope and comfort. Isaiah looks both at the crises (spiritual and physical) of his own era and also at the things that God planned for the coming centuries. As he does so, he describes the changes in perspective that God's people must make. This portion of Isaiah thus calls us to set aside our own agendas and preconceptions so that we can appreciate the security and hope that we can have in God.

* These section divisions are somewhat arbitrary, chosen partially for thematic reasons and partially to accommodate our quarterly schedule. The book of Isaiah has a unified plan, with several themes that tie it all together. Most commentators divide the book into two main sections, chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66. Other commentators make a further division between chapters 55 and 56. Some modern commentators claim that these 'sections' are the work of two or three different authors (in part, because they reject the possibility that a prophet could actually foretell the future).

Then, in autumn, we shall look at Isaiah 50-66, which calls us to "arise, shine, for your light has come" (Isaiah 60:1; see also 60:19-20). Here, the prophet looks at the Messiah's nature and ministry. He calls believers to look above their activities in this world, so that they can share in the light that God is about to send into a world of darkness. The contrast between light and darkness dominates these chapters, and we find some of the Old Testament's most compelling prophetic descriptions of Jesus. We also read some urgent pleas to leave worldly things behind so that we can follow the Messiah, the Christ, with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Given the historical background, what might Isaiah's original listeners have been concerned about? What should they have been concerned about? Looking at some of the major themes of Isaiah, what might we hope to learn from studying the book? How is the theme of "a remnant will return" important to us?

The Need To Understand God (Isaiah 1:2-9)

The prophet immediately gets to the heart of the matter. Whatever other problems God's people may have, the root problem is that they have lost sight of God's nature and of their relationship with him. They have drifted so far that they do not even realize how much this has hurt them. God has already planned to seek out and raise up survivors (a remnant) to build for the future.

Isaiah indicates at once that God's people have offered him an unnatural and unnecessary resistance (1:2-6). They are his children, indeed his own creations, yet they have willfully distanced themselves from him. Even the dull-brained ox knows who his master is, and even the stubborn donkey acknowledges the source and location of his food. If beasts can have this awareness, then there is no excuse for God's people not to seek him and know him.

Moreover, their spiritual sickness has led to self-inflicted harm. Isaiah's description of wounds and injuries is mainly figurative, since for most of his lifetime the people had what they needed physically. But their hearts were in bad condition, and they paid a price inside themselves even though they would not have been willing to acknowledge their inner misery. Outwardly, they may have looked all right, but there was no "soundness" in them.

Human beings are created with an innate need for God; to deny this is to deny our own nature. Yet even believers try to find other things to play the role that God alone is meant to play. Most

things that worldly persons do are attempts to find security, significance, purpose, and love without having to seek God; yet God alone can meet these needs in a genuine and lasting way.

This spiritual desolation, already permeating their lives, will someday give place to physical devastation - yet there will be survivors (1:7-9). When Isaiah foresees invasion(s) by foreigners* that will make the land desolate, this will only be a physical manifestation of the ways that the people have already allowed pagan behavior and perspectives to invade their lives.

* The northern tribes would be invaded and destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC. Judah itself would be brutally invaded by the Assyrians in 701 BC, and saved only by God's intervention. And, after Isaiah's lifetime but foreseen by him, Babylon would attack several times, finally conquering and enslaving Judah in 586 BC.

Likewise, when the day comes that the city of Jerusalem is under siege, with the people fearing for their lives, this again will only be a physical parallel of the spiritual siege of pagan values that has already pulled them away from God. Yet, no matter what happens, God promises that there will always be survivors to carry on and to build for the future. This will always be true both physically and spiritually - God will always maintain a remnant of his people.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah contrast the awareness of animals with the spiritual rebellion of God's people? What harm have the people suffered (and will they suffer) from their spiritual illnesses? Why will foreign invasions be appropriate as discipline? What would the promise of survivors have meant to Isaiah's listeners? What should it mean to us? How is this theme illustrated elsewhere in the Scriptures?

An Opportunity To Choose (Isaiah 1:10-20)

Regardless of how far we may have strayed from God, he is always willing to take us back when we realize and confess our need for him. Here, God graciously invites his people to turn their hearts back to him, for he has compassion on them and he desires to bless them. Yet they must choose this for themselves, and must accept a relationship with him based on his grace.

Though they make frequent offerings and assemble regularly, these have become meaningless (1:10-17). God's weariness with pointless activity ought to be convicting to us as well, for the church frequently substitutes activity for worship, and substitutes slogans and pat answers for an understanding of God. Physical activities and outward actions of any kind only have significance to God if they are done for the right reasons.

Although they participate eagerly in 'worship' activities, they live without concern or pity for the poor, the oppressed, and the sorrowful. Like our own society, they either ignore them or patronize them. They seek God and worship God only for the positive feelings that it gives them. They do not have God in their hearts, or else their attitudes towards things around them would be much different. They must learn to do right, and to do right for the right reasons.

The lives of the worldly are filled with meaningless activity. The world deals with everything from sports to commerce to government to education with superficial slogans and faulty logic, a false sense of urgency, distorted values, appeals to selfish desires and selfish ambition, and a host of similar tactics that draw in even the faithful. In the church, we are not meant to use these same fleshly tactics in the name of ministry. Not only should we have different, spiritual goals; we ought also to pursue them by more spiritual, godly means.

It is in this context that Isaiah offers his well-known appeal to reason* (1:18-20). Unlike pagan leaders and authorities, God welcomes our questions, so long as we ask for the right reasons. He does not want or need slaves; he desires loving children whom he in turn can love. So, when we have strayed, he calls us to draw near. He does not call for dramatic demonstrations of our good intentions, nor for self-punishment, but for us to repair our relationship with him. Our extraordinary God will explain, teach, and correct us with all patience, as long as we need it.

* Some versions (such as the NRSV) interpret this verse to say that God offers them the opportunity to 'argue' or debate with him. The word in the original does imply an exchange of views, but the context makes it clear that the only valid outcome will be for them to accept God's perspective. God is still being extraordinarily gracious in offering to explain himself, rather than demanding an unreasoning obedience.

As if that were not enough, he also promises forgiveness. The folly and selfishness of our sins glow blood-red as they testify against us, yet God waits to wash them away and make us pure. Here again is the contrast between God's nature and human logic. He does not expect his people to make up for the things they have done wrong - indeed, this would be absolutely impossible. Not only is he willing to explain patiently why they have wandered from him, but he also will forgive all they have done during that time. It will be forgotten in God's joy over their return.

Yet there is one thing they must do: they must choose of their own will to return to God on his terms. The prophet cannot do this for them, and God will not do it. Likewise, when we realize our need for God in a new way, we must appeal directly to him for help. Do not wait for a motivational lesson or a 'sign' or any such thing. We must start with God himself; if we need any of those other things, God can provide them - but we must make the right first step if we want to get the most benefit from the things he uses.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is God not pleased with their sacrifices and assemblies? What lessons does this hold for us? What changes did God want from them? What does the prophet mean by 'reason together'? What choices do we have that are similar to those that Isaiah calls his listeners to make?

Purging Away The Dross (Isaiah 1:21-31)

God's appeal through Isaiah is an urgent one, for he has already made his plans for the future. They have become too degraded in body and in spirit for God to remain inactive, and so no one will be immune from the coming discipline. They must be purged, cleansed, and pruned. But even during this painful process, the faithful will always have God's promise of restoration.

The once-faithful city of Jerusalem, while outwardly strong, is in spiritual ruin (1:21-26). When it falls physically, it will only be a confirmation of what has long since happened to it inside. It symbolizes all that is wrong with God's people, with accumulated spiritual pollution ranging from selfishness to greed to indifference and more. The people have become so pre-occupied with their own agendas and desires that they do not realize how hard their hearts have become.

So discipline is now a sad necessity. They must be purged and cleansed, to remove the dross (slag) of spiritual impurity. God will not destroy them, but will withdraw his protective hand a little at a time, giving them numerous chances to see their need for him before once and for all allowing the nation to fall. And even after that there is the promise of restoration.

There will always be some truly faithful believers who must suffer along with the majority who refuse to repent. For them, the promise of a surviving remnant can offer at least the comfort that

the sufferings of their generation will not be meaningless. Though they may never see positive results or outward fruit, they can know that they are part of an important process.

Isaiah's opening appeal closes on a note of promise and warning (1:27-31). No one should ever doubt that true Zion (God's people) will be redeemed. There never has been, and never will be, a time when God does not have a faithful remnant on the earth to witness for him and to preserve his truths for a new generation. But this necessitates repeated periods of discipline. The genuine followers of Jesus are never in the mainstream of any society on earth. The values of God and of Jesus will always be a challenge for even the most faithful of believers to put into practice.

When discipline comes, no one is immune, whether strong or weak, rich or poor. The mightiest man will be nothing but tinder for the fire, and his very work, the selfish labor to which he has devoted himself, will be the spark that lights the fire. Let us also take warning from this. In Isaiah's lifetime, God dealt with his people as a physical nation. Today, he proclaims the same message, presents the same choice, gives the same warning, and offers the same promise of a remnant, to the church of Jesus Christ. Each of us must make his or her own choices, for the remnant is always made up of individuals.

Let us not fall into the error of thinking that God is speaking today to our physical nation, calling it to make him a part of their government or their culture. It is our own priorities, our own values, our own relationship with God, on which we must focus our attention. Your relationship with God is the one thing that you can always have; it will always be your own, and no one can take it from you. Do not wait for or rely upon your congregation or your family or your nation to come to God. Through the prophet Isaiah, God is calling directly to you.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is the point of Isaiah's lament over the current condition of the city of Jerusalem? What kind of impurities and dross must be removed? How will the coming discipline do this? What kind of discipline would God use with the church today? What other parallels can we see?

Bibliography

The complexity and breadth of the book of Isaiah has made it the subject of a great many commentaries and other books. Many of these focus mainly on the trivial, but there are also some good references, of which some follow, that aim more for an understanding of the spiritual lessons and themes. These books are at a variety of levels in terms of depth and detail; you are welcome to see me if you would like some thoughts on which may be most useful to you.

Mark W. Elliott, *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*
G.W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, in *Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 6*, Frank Gaebelien, editor
Jim McGuiggan, *The Book Of Isaiah*
Steven A. McKinion, *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture: Isaiah 1-39*
J.A. Motyer, *Isaiah - An Introduction & Commentary* (Tyndale Commentaries)
J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy Of Isaiah*
John N. Oswalt *The Book Of Isaiah* (New International Commentary, two volumes)
Barry G. Webb, *The Message Of Isaiah* (The Bible Speaks Today)
Robert Louis Wilken, *Isaiah* (The Church's Bible)
Edward J. Young, *The Book Of Isaiah* (three volumes)

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2008*

©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Two: The Lord Almighty Has A Day In Store (Isaiah 2:1-4:1)

It is characteristic of Isaiah to alternate encouraging visions and messages with stern warnings and admonitions. Here, Isaiah offers his listeners a grand vision of what things can be like, and someday will be like, for God's people. Then he warns them to stop trusting in their possessions, their leaders, and other earthly things, or else they instead will face disaster.

Review From Last Week

As we shall do in most weeks, we shall start with a short review of the previous class. Isaiah opens with God's call for his people to "come, let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:1-31). Isaiah's ministry took place in the divided kingdom era, when God's people were divided, with an idolatrous northern kingdom that would soon fall and a southern kingdom (Judah) going through a recurring cycle of reforms followed by spiritual decay.

The prophet stresses the need to know and understand our God, without offering unnecessary resistance to him. God gives his people a gracious opportunity to choose to come back, yet they continue to indulge themselves in meaningless 'religious' activity, even when God appeals to their reason. God must purge away the dross, for now Jerusalem lies in spiritual ruin. When it one day is attacked by pagans, this will only be a physical enactment of what has already taken place spiritually. Throughout the book, Isaiah combines promise and warning.

The Mountain Of The Lord's Temple (Isaiah 2:1-5)

Here, Isaiah offers the first of many glimpses into what the future holds for faithful believers. His idealized imagery of the "mountain of the Lord" combines majestic physical sights with an expansive promise of God's reign being extended throughout the earth. This vision, of course, finds its ultimate fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus and its influence throughout the world.

Both from the content and from the phrase "in the last days"* , we can see that these verses look ahead to the promised Messiah (2:1-5). The imagery of the temple on a mountain calls to mind the physical location of the ancient temple in Jerusalem, which rested on the top of a plateau, so that those traveling towards the city would see it and its temple high above them.

* See also Acts 2:17, 2 Timothy 3:1, Hebrews 1:2, James 5:3, 1 Peter 1:20, 2 Peter 3:3, and Jude 1:18. In the New Testament, 'the last days' or 'the last times' refer to the spiritual era that began with Jesus. When the NT refers to the end of the world, it uses 'the last day' or 'the last time' (singular), as in John 6:40-54, 11:24, 12:48, 1 Peter 1:5.

In this prophetic image, the Lord's temple is its own mountain, and is higher than all the rest. The natural imagery is combined with a fanciful note, as the nations are "streaming" (literally, uphill) to reach it. The church of Jesus is certainly on a higher level, figuratively and spiritually, than any other place or form of worship. Yet it is not an earthly or physical kingdom, so that those who come to it must go 'uphill', against the perspectives and inclinations of the world.

This is an expression of the eagerness for God that Isaiah is urging upon his readers. Sensitive listeners in his audience would have been convicted by the thought of Gentile nations streaming so enthusiastically to 'their' God. Yet it was always God's plan for his people Israel to serve merely as the seed through which to bless believers from all nations and cultures.

With 'the law' (God's word and will) issuing from this new, spiritual, figurative version of Mount Zion*, a lot of things will change. God, and God alone, is judge, mediator, and peacemaker. In the church of Jesus Christ, we have the capability of realizing this kind of harmony despite borders, barriers, and other differences. The goal of world peace** has been eagerly sought for millennia by the world's leaders and thinkers, but the worldly will never find it. Only in Jesus can those with inherently different interests and perspectives be brought to real harmony.

* The name Mount Zion was the name of one of the hills on which the original city of Jerusalem stood. From the time of David, the name Zion came to stand figuratively for the temple, the city, the nation or people of Israel, or more generally for God's presence as expressed through any of these.

** A sculpture based on Isaiah's phrase "they will beat their swords into plowshares" stands outside of the United Nations building. Isaiah described their goal more aptly and succinctly than any politician or diplomat ever could.

This is an idealized vision, for not even in the church do we ever achieve such a state for long. Yet in Jesus we do have everything we need to bring this about, and even if we never attain the ideal, it is well worth making the effort to move beyond our present condition. And so the prophet adds his call to God's people, "let us walk in the light of the Lord". For while we do so, we can see, at least on a small scale, the kinds of transformations that Isaiah describes here. Yet to realize this, we have much to learn, as Isaiah is about to detail.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does Isaiah mean by "the last days"? Why does he use the image of a mountain? How is this vision fulfilled in Jesus? Can we experience what Isaiah describes here? Why does Isaiah use figurative images instead of literal descriptions? What response to this vision did God want from Isaiah's original listeners? What response might he want from us?

The Lord Alone Will Be Exalted (Isaiah 2:6-22)

The vivid warnings in this passage strike at a problem that causes many other spiritual ills, both in Isaiah's day and in our own. God's people must always strive to place their faith fully in him and in him alone. It will always seem easier to put trust and confidence in our own abilities or in things of this world. But God can put to shame all human pretensions, any time that he wishes.

As the prophet describes a land that is full of both idols and treasures, there is much that sounds familiar (2:6-11). In any time and place, humans tend to trust in everything but God. Here, they eagerly adopt and imitate pagan practices. They bow in worship to human-made things - in a sense, worshiping themselves. They have plenty of silver, gold, and other valuables, but this has made them complacent. Possession of excess wealth is not automatically a sign of God's favor.

So they will be taught how easily human pride can be brought low. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34, also quoted in 1 Peter 5:5); this includes all those who foolishly consider themselves to be wiser, stronger, or more righteous than others. Let us not abuse God's extraordinary patience, for the time will come when nothing of this earth will be left, and "the Lord alone will be exalted", for only he can offer us a way to rise above this world.

When God rises to shake the earth (2:12-22), it is never out of mere human anger or spite. God will always prefer to be patient and compassionate, but our stubborn hearts can eventually make it necessary that he discipline us out of spiritual necessity. When it does come to pass, this

announced "day of the Lord"* will have several features, which also characterize any such "day"* when God decides to intervene directly and unmistakably in human history.

* The prophets frequently use "day of the Lord" to refer to any occasion on which, after due warning, God acts decisively among his people. Expressions such as "in that day" or "the Lord is coming" are also used for the same purpose. They rarely if ever refer to the so-called 'end times'. Here are a few of the many uses of such phrases in Isaiah: 2:11-12, 7:18-23, 10:20, 13:6, 13:9, 19:16-24, 22:5, 27:12-13, 34:8, 61:2.

This will be a "day" for humbling humanity, for exalting God, and for crushing idols. These are inter-related, since all three emphasize that God alone is worthy of exaltation and worship. God dwarfs all human strength and wisdom - the prophet illustrates this with images of humans diving into caverns and clinging to crags, to escape God's wrath. Their own devices and ideas cannot stand against God, so they can only take refuge in his creation!

Likewise, the worthlessness of idols has been exposed, and their former devotees are happy to toss them to the rats and bats (who probably have the good sense not to worship the idols!). Even aside from those occasions on which God acts drastically, it is not hard to see how often human-made idols are shown to be worthless and without substance. Yet, unwilling to humble themselves before God, humans often continue to look for new and equally useless idols.

We who believe in Jesus Christ are the only ones who can break out of this vicious circle once and for all, and we are the only ones who can help others to find God as the true source of hope and peace. Let us heed the words of the prophet, set aside our worldly agendas, and withdraw our support and loyalties from things in this world that cannot meet the real needs of humanity.

The prophet advises us to develop a proper reverence and respect for God now, so that we will not have to be overwhelmed with "the dread of the lord" when he comes. Instead, those who have placed their hope fully in him can rejoice in seeing "the splendor of his majesty" displayed.

Human beings were created to seek, serve, and worship God. Other persons ought to evoke our compassion, grace, and empathy, but never worship. We are to love our neighbors, not worship them. If Christians truly want to help others to experience God's grace and love, then it is imperative that we stop putting so much trust and hope in human beings and in human-made things. Truly the prophet asks us "of what account?" are such things. Valued and sought-after things of this world are often worse than worthless in God's sight, and at best they are to be appreciated as blessings and as further expressions of God's grace.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How can the land be full of treasures and full of idols at the same time? Aren't their treasures blessings from God? What kind of a "day" is Isaiah foretelling? When did it come? What kind of "day" should we expect? What other lessons are there in this passage for the church of Jesus?

Images Of Humbling (Isaiah 3:1-4:1)

The prophet's vivid imagery in these verses emphasizes two important points that in turn relate back to some of Isaiah main overall themes. First, when God's discipline comes, no one will be exempt, regardless of strength, position or wealth. Then also, they will be thoroughly humbled, even humiliated. Those who refuse to humble themselves will find that God will do it for them.

Isaiah's reminder that all will be humbled applies to believers and unbelievers alike (3:1-15). Unlike the world, God does not view persons in terms of position, credentials, talent, or other

such things. Unlike the world, God does not consider any human to be more important or less important than any other human. When discipline comes, warriors and judges will be treated no differently from craftsmen. Humility and mercy matter to God more than talent or position.

Isaiah's images of the people being ruled by youths and women are not meant literally*, but as word pictures that emphasize how pathetic the rulers and "leaders" of God's people have become. This applies not only to the national leadership, but also to all those who should have been examples and servants to those in need of guidance and spiritual edification. From the most powerful to the most destitute, the people have become pre-occupied with materialism and physical pleasure, and no one wants to be the one to challenge this complacent status quo.

* The one female monarch of Judah, the idolatrous queen Athaliah (2 Kings 11:1-21, 2 Chronicles 22:10-23:21), came well before Isaiah's time. There were some subsequent kings who were enthroned as boys, but this does not match the picture Isaiah draws of a society dominated by youths. This, rather, was fulfilled in a figurative sense, by the weak and ungodly persons who filled most positions of authority.

This is how they have "brought disaster upon themselves" (verse 9): not by a sudden decision to leave God, nor by a few dramatically violent or sinful actions, but rather by a long, slow process of allowing short-term fleshly satisfaction to become more important to them than God's word and God's will. The judgment God will render on oppressors, plunderers, and the like is a stern reminder of the end results of spiritual laziness and worldly compromise.

Sadly, they have reversed a pattern by going from spiritual riches to worldly rags (3:16-4:1). Their lives of luxury and finery conceal (and also demonstrate) their inward emptiness and the meaningless nature of their activities. The coming destitution and degradation are graphically depicted in the verses addressed specifically to the women of Judah* (especially 17-19).

* Note here that 4:1 is similar in nature to some of the imagery earlier in the chapter. It depicts the women of Judah as desperate to find husbands, not because God thinks that this is essential for women, but because his people will be reduced to a state of desperate physical and emotional need - again as an outward reflection of their already desperate spiritual condition.

The expensive and ornate objects that they value will not only be taken away, but will themselves be degraded and ruined. The prophet even goes into minute detail in listing all of the objects that they have foolishly valued and enjoyed more than they valued God and his wishes. How convicting would it be to us if God were to list all of the objects and activities that we ourselves prefer to his Word and to helping his people to know him?!

All this will only be a physical demonstration of what has already happened in our hearts. Even in the church of Jesus, we can be more easily motivated by fear and guilt, and we can be more concerned with outward results than with truly knowing and loving God. Thus we also ought to honor and apply the prophet's call to humility. Let us have done with trying to serve God in the manner of the world, worrying about outward results and fleshly opinion. Let us resolve as Paul did (1 Corinthians 2:2) "to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified".

Questions for Discussion or Study: What general themes are illustrated in this chapter? What did Isaiah want his listeners to learn? What should we learn from them? What does this chapter say specifically to leaders (whom does this include?) of God's people?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2008
©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Three: The Branch & The Vineyard (Isaiah 4:2-5:30)

Isaiah now uses two images similar in nature but different in their implications. The image of a life-giving Branch is another of the prophet's idealized visions of a glorious future for God's people. On the other hand, the image of an unproductive vineyard suggests a life of fruitless disappointment. This picture is followed by a series of specific warnings to God's people.

Review Of Previous Classes

The first five chapters of Isaiah* are the prophet's introductory message and exhortation to God's people. Many of the themes and ideas in this section will often re-appear later in the book.

* Chapter 6 is a 'flashback' to the occasion on which God sent Isaiah out to prophesy. Then there is a lengthy collection of messages, most of which are connected with specific events or nations of significance in Isaiah's lifetime, in chapters 7-39.

Isaiah opens with God's call to "come, let us reason together" (1:1-31). Isaiah emphasizes the need for us to know and to understand God, reminds us of the open opportunity to choose to seek God, and explains the need for God to purge away impurities from those who want to know him.

There is severity in the prophet's call, for "the Lord Almighty has a day in store", when he will intervene decisively in the affairs of this world (2:1-4:1). Isaiah will often alternate positive, inspiring images with stern warnings. So here he begins with a vision of "the mountain of the Lord's temple", an idealized image of the blessings that will come through the Messiah. In their eagerness to know God, the nations are even 'streaming' uphill in order to be in God's presence.

Humans worship many things, yet in the end "the Lord alone will be exalted", with all else exposed as meaningless. God is ready to rise and shake the earth, as Isaiah illustrates with images of humbling, from which no human is exempt. We can voluntarily humble ourselves now, or we can have God do it for us later. Isaiah's generation is warned that their present riches can just as easily become rags. This is, sadly, what has already happened to them spiritually.

The Glorious Branch (Isaiah 4:2-6)

This is another vision with Messianic implications. The image of the Branch is one of holiness and holy living, brought about by God's gracious cleansing. In the second part of the vision, God also promises guidance, protection, and other blessings. As it looks ahead to the Messiah, this short passage connects several themes and images found in other books of the Old Testament.

The vision of the "Branch of the Lord" ties together several concepts (4:2-4). The image of a branch is chosen here as an expression of life and growth, blessings that in their truest forms can only come from God. The Branch*, or shoot, is also a prophetic image that is frequently used to represent the Messiah (see also Isaiah 11:1, 53:2; Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12)**.

* The name Nazarene is a different form of the Hebrew word for 'branch' or 'shoot'. So Matthew, referring to Jesus' home in Nazareth, says the prophets referred to the Messiah as a 'Nazarene' (Matthew 2:23).

** For an interesting study, compare these Old Testament references with John 15:1-8, in which similar imagery is used in a somewhat different way.

The Branch allows God's people to experience and benefit from the full, true fruit of the land. God's people often have a tendency to confuse material blessings with their relationship with God; this was true in the Old Testament era, has been true throughout church history, and is true today. Thus the Messiah makes it possible to perceive and appreciate the more lasting things of God. The real 'fruit of the land' consists of blessings such as peace, security, grace, mercy, and spiritual contentment. These come in lasting form only through God and his 'Branch', Jesus.

These important blessings, though, will come only to the "survivors in Israel". Once more we see how essential the remnant is to God's plans. Cleansing, as Isaiah describes here, must take place before enjoying the blessings that the Branch brings. God's highest aspirations for his people do not involve material things or earthly privileges, but holiness. True holiness is not a mere absence of sin or dirt, but rather the presence of God living among us in a meaningful way.

This is emphasized in the further blessings that the Branch can bring, blessings that we can have both by day and by night, that is, at all times (4:5-6). God's constant presence is promised with a reminder of the ways that God once led his people in the desert*. The prophet is not promising a literal return to the system used in the exodus, but rather a more complete and more spiritual fulfillment of it. Through Jesus the Messiah, we are able to have God's presence with us at all times. God's Spirit also provides us with important guidance whenever we have the need.

* Compare verse 5 with, for example, Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19, 14:24, 24:16, and others.

The Branch also provides God's people with shelter and refuge. Once again, Jesus takes these blessings a step beyond the physical ways in which God promised them to his people under the Old Covenant. Jesus offers us refuge from the cold, meaningless nature of worldly living. He offers a safe place to experience what it really means to be made in God's image. Jesus also provides shelter and protection from the world's assaults on our relationship with God. As long as we remain in Jesus, we remain in God's grace, and the world cannot snatch us away from him.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what ways is a branch or shoot an appropriate image for the Messiah? Would this image have meant anything different for Isaiah's original audience? What "fruit of the land" do we experience through Jesus? In what way are we 'survivors'? How do the other images in this passage apply to Christians?

An Unproductive Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7)

This passage also makes use of imagery that is frequently found in the Scriptures. Like the Branch, a vineyard suggests life and growth. But this vineyard has not produced good fruit, despite being given every advantage. The prophet uses this theme both to convict the people of his own time and also to caution us about how easy it is for God's people to drift away.

In his 'song of the vineyard' (5:1-6), Isaiah depicts a farmer or planter, representing God, making careful preparations for his vineyard. The vineyard is given every possible benefit and advantage, so that it has no reason not to be fertile. Yet, despite the care and attention that is lovingly given to it, the vineyard yields only bad fruit.

Since the crop of this vineyard is worse than useless, the farmer decides to destroy the vineyard. He plans even to make clear to passers-by that the land is useless, by removing all hedges and walls, and yanking out all traces of growth. The implication is that it would be less objectionable for the vineyard to be completely barren, rather than to produce disgusting, objectionable 'fruit'.

The meaning of the song is simple and somber (5:7). God's people, in Isaiah's time divided into two rival nations*, should be a source of life, growth, good fruit, and other positive things. They could have produced these things, not because of their own superiority, but because God has lavished upon them his grace, wisdom, and compassion.

* Israel, the northern kingdom, had a history of idolatry and would be destroyed during Isaiah's lifetime. Judah, the southern kingdom, faced a series of spiritual crises. See the notes from Week One for more.

God hoped for Judah, in particular, to be "the garden of his delight". This makes his disappointment that much worse when they ignore him. His people not only fail to produce good fruit, but even produce wickedness and violence. So too, as believers today we should look honestly at our lives and ministries, so that the fruit we produce can be pleasing to God. Producing some kind of results, at least outwardly, is not difficult in itself - what is a challenge is to produce the kind of fruit that truly pleases God: "fruit that will last" (John 15:16).

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is a vineyard a suitable analogy for God's people? How does it connect with the Branch passage above? Are there other biblical images or analogies that have similar themes? What was the lesson of the vineyard for the prophet's original audience? What is its message to us?

A Series Of Woes (Isaiah 5:8-30)

Isaiah now becomes very specific in detailing the ways that God's people have turned away from the things that God had told them. Their actions, perspectives, and motivation have become as fleshly, as short-sighted, and as selfish as those of most pagans. The spiritual problems that the prophet addresses can easily be seen today, so its message is no less convicting to us.

Isaiah's series of pronouncements of "woe to those who . . ." (5:8-23) can be compared with Jesus' criticisms of the Pharisees in Matthew 23*. The list of specifics is quite different, yet these passages describe two examples of the false foundations that humans can lay for their lives.

* The prophet's series of woes also has several points in common with Jesus' remarks in Luke 6:24-26.

Owners of great houses and fields are admired and envied in this world, but here the prophet pronounces a woe upon them. It is interesting to note that God will not necessarily destroy the houses and fields themselves, but rather will make the houses desolate and the fields unfruitful. After all, it is not these physical locations and objects that are to blame, but rather the attitudes of their 'owners' towards them.

Seekers of pleasure are also warned that God will deal with them. As they have become pre-occupied with the ways that their bodies can experience pleasing sensations, they have gradually ceased to appreciate the works and wisdom of God. Let us also not be deceived, for even Christians can fall into this error. The belief that we can indulge ourselves in the goodies of this world, while maintaining a genuine love and appreciation for God, is merely a fleshly delusion.

Rationalizing sin also evokes a cry of woe from the prophet. Isaiah aptly describes this mentality as one of arrogance and skepticism, willfully twisting the truth in brazen acts of self-deceit. Those who are wise in their own eyes also come in for their share of 'woe', for it is prideful to exalt human wisdom above that of God. In truth, there is no such thing as a truly wise human, unless it is one who realizes his or her complete dependence on God's grace and wisdom.

Finally, Isaiah calls 'woes' upon those who enjoy boasting and those who practice injustice. It does not matter to God what excuses we have for such sins. Nor does he consider it acceptable to boast about our own achievements as long as we then give God 'credit' afterwards.

God's primary interest in 'justice' in this world is not negative - punishment of the guilty - but rather positive: fair treatment of the innocent and honest, even if they cannot offer money or other incentives in return. Our own country's system of 'justice', in which truth and right matter much less than worldly knowledge, courtroom tactics, personal ambitions, and financial resources, is unacceptable by God's standards. We accept it mainly because we have been told so often that it is 'the best system in the world' that we are afraid to question its many flaws.

The overall problem with God's people is that they have "spurned the Word of the Holy One" (5:24-30). Thus they have no protection from the temptations and attacks of the worldly and the sinful. Like dry grass in the flames, they are defenseless. They are already utterly defeated spiritually, and this will soon be reflected outwardly when they are attacked, defeated, and punished by distant nations. Already the roar of these "lions" can be heard, and the warning has been clearly given.

The call for a return to God's perspective is just as urgent for believers today as it was during the prophet's lifetime. Nor is his criticism that they had "spurned the Word of the Holy One" limited to humanity's prideful disregard for the factual teachings and outward commands of Scripture. It is quite possible even to accept these things and still to have a disregard for the values and perspectives of God.

We believers all too glibly rationalize the pursuit of material wealth, the acceptance of rampant injustices and inequities in our society, and the trendy, consumer-driven approach to the church that reduces ministry to the technique of selling a commercial product. Pursuing ministry with godly methods and with godly expectations is just as important as believing godly facts. Isaiah's call thus challenges us all to consider our own relationship with God, and to strengthen our devotion to following his will and nothing else.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does the prophet intend to imply by saying "woe to you"? Why does each of the things he mentions merit this dire pronouncement? How would each of these woes be applicable today? What does it mean to 'spurn' God's Word? What consequences does it bring, both in the original context and for us?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2008*

©2008 by *Mark Garner*

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Four: Go & Tell This People (Isaiah 6:1-13)

In this chapter, the prophet goes backwards chronologically, to describe the occasion on which God sent him forth on a ministry of prophecy and exhortation. Isaiah's personal encounter with God was an overwhelming experience that prepared him to do whatever God asked of him. Yet the prophet is cautioned that his listeners will not respond as humbly and as readily as he has.

Review Of Previous Classes

The book of Isaiah opens with the prophet's call for God's people to, "Come, let us reason together" (1:1-31). There is some urgency in this, because Isaiah also says that, "the Lord Almighty has a day in store" (2:1-4:1), on which God must deal with the sins of his people. The prophet first describes his image of the "mountain of the Lord's temple", an idealized depiction of what things can be like through God's Messiah. But at that time, the Lord alone will be exalted. Several images of humbling and even humiliation emphasize this point.

In his visions of the Branch and the vineyard (4:2-5:30), Isaiah uses symbols of life and growth to contrast God's will for his people with the reality of their spiritual complacency. The image of the glorious "Branch" looks ahead to the Messiah, who will minister in grace and truth to the survivors in Israel. Like the cloud and fire in Exodus, he will be with them by day and by night.

The prophet's song of the vineyard tells of a field that is unproductive despite having received the very best of care. The song's meaning parallels the spiritual condition of God's people, who have produced bad fruit despite all of the blessings that God has given them. Isaiah then pronounces a series of woes against the things that God's people are doing. He indicates that these mistakes come from spurning the Word of the Holy One.

Holy, Holy, Holy Is The Lord Almighty (Isaiah 6:1-4)

When Isaiah finds himself before God's throne, he is overwhelmed with powerful sights and sounds, so that God's absolute holiness is impressed upon him. Before God sends forth Isaiah to carry out the demanding and important ministry that he has prepared for him, the prophet will first be given an unforgettable demonstration of God's majesty, dominion, and power.

Isaiah had this extraordinary experience in the year that King Uzziah died* (6:1). To a faithful believer like Isaiah, there was probably an obvious contrast between the late king and God. Uzziah seriously tarnished a generally positive reign with some senseless acts of pride, and thus came to a humiliating and shameful end*. By comparison, God's absolute purity and overwhelming majesty are now displayed unmistakably for the prophet. The sight of the Lord on his throne gives Isaiah a frighteningly clear picture of spiritual reality.

* Approximately 740 BC.

** See 2 Kings 15:1-7 (Azariah is another name for the same king) and 2 Chronicles 26:1-3.

While it is likely that Isaiah's description is merely a rough attempt to describe something beyond the ability of our human senses to grasp in its entirety, we get enough from Isaiah's

description to see how extraordinary this scene is. In his description of the seraphs* as they call to each other (6:2-4), just knowing that each of them has six wings tells us a lot! The point of this vision is not for us to attempt to analyze the exact structure and specific purpose of these seraphs, but rather to realize the incredible nature of the true, spiritual realm that God inhabits. We cannot see it now, but someday we shall - and we won't be disappointed.

* The plural "seraphim" can also be used. The ending ' - im' is a common Hebrew plural form.

The seraphs call to one another with the message that God wants to impress upon the humble prophet: that God is absolutely holy, and that whatever glory we see now in our own world comes only from him. No doubt Isaiah already believed this as fact, but this experience will impress it upon him in a much deeper way. It will help him in his ministry, and it is also an act of generosity on God's part. Isaiah will have to go through some tough times in the course of his ministry, but he will never doubt that God's power and majesty are overwhelming.

The mere sound of the voices of the seraphs shakes the doorposts and the threshold of God's throne room. Then also, the temple fills up with smoke. These developments are also appropriate in view of God's holiness. Even his seraphs have strength and glory that would humble anyone and anything in this world. The entire scene is one of grandeur and power on a scale that makes it laughable for humans to challenge God or to question God.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What relevance does the year of this vision have? What might be God's reasons for bringing the prophet before him in such a way? Of what significance are the seraphs? What does this scene tell us about God's nature?

Isaiah's Sin Atoned For (Isaiah 6:5-7)

Overwhelmed by the circumstance of being in God's presence, the prophet at once realizes how unworthy he is to be standing before God. Even the process of atonement that he undergoes must have been a fearful experience just in itself. Isaiah thus experiences on a personal level one of the lessons that God wants all of his people to grasp, before it is too late for them.

Isaiah's spontaneous response to his surroundings is to cry out, "woe to me!", for he cannot help realizing the contrast between his mortal, fallible nature and God's divine purity (6:5). Seeing a glimpse of God's true nature with his own eyes, he feels his own uncleanness, even to sensing that his very lips are unclean in God's sight.

Thus, when the prophet cries out that, "my eyes have seen the King", this is not a boast or a cry of excitement, but a heartfelt expression of wonder mixed with true, godly fear. Isaiah experiences - and will no doubt never forget - what it is like to be in God's presence. Likewise, the more that we truly understand what God is actually like, the more we ourselves shall come to feel as Isaiah does here. We ought not to expect the kinds of excitement that the world seeks, but instead ought to seek to understand God in the way that Isaiah is now experiencing.

God did not bring the prophet before him in order to condemn him, and Isaiah is assured that his guilt is taken away (6:6-7). This is accomplished when one of the seraphs takes a live coal from the altar and touches it to Isaiah's lips, which he has acknowledged to be unclean. Symbolically, his guilt is consumed by fire, in a fashion similar to the burning of sacrificial animals.

Notice that there is no shedding of blood involved, which we might have expected. Isaiah's sin has been atoned for, not (at least not necessarily) forgiven and forgotten*. The situation called for immediate atonement to be made, so that he could remain in God's presence long enough to be given the prophetic call. Even so, this is a good illustration of the cost of atonement. Merely reading this passage cannot convey the fear involved in having a burning coal thrust into one's face! Amongst other things that he learns, Isaiah can now appreciate that atonement for sins does not come easily - and it cannot come at all through his own good works.

* As with all of the persons under the Old Covenant, Isaiah had to look ahead to the Messiah who would remove all sin permanently from those who believed. The Scripture never defines the precise mechanism by which this was done, so that the best we can do (aside from fruitless speculation) is to trust that in some way the blood of Jesus was effective in bringing final and complete forgiveness also to the faithful who lived before he walked our earth.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah react to these surroundings in the way he does? What might our own reaction be? What should we learn from his attitude? How is the seraph's action of atonement appropriate? What symbolism is involved? What does Isaiah gain from the act? Are there any parallels or lessons for us?

Ever Hearing, But Never Understanding (Isaiah 6:8-13)

God now gives Isaiah the message he is to proclaim. Isaiah's eagerness to serve God contrasts sharply with the message that he is called to preach. God makes it plain to the prophet that his task will not be an easy one, for he will be speaking to a largely unreceptive audience. Isaiah will have to be motivated by his faith in God, not by outward results or personal popularity.

Only now, with the stage set and the lessons learned, does God ask the rhetorical question, "Whom shall I send?" (6:8-10). Isaiah's willing response, so often quoted today, is more meaningful in its full context. He is not waving his hand eagerly, thrilled to take on a role that will bring him glory and excitement. Quite the contrary, he is speaking in fear, humility, and respectfulness; in his relief and gratitude he is willing to take on whatever God has in mind.

It is fortunate that Isaiah has this attitude, because God does not send him out on a mission that will bring impressive results or popularity. Isaiah is told from the beginning that his will be the largely fruitless task of calling attention to the people's spiritual blindness and spiritual deafness. Since our role in this lost world parallels Isaiah's much more closely than we usually realize, we also should strive for his attitude of humble, reverent responsiveness to God.

Those familiar only with the isolated saying "here am I, send me" may be shocked to read God's instructions to the prophet, because at first glance it seems as if God wants his people to be blinded and hardened. But the description of them as 'ever seeing, but never perceiving'* is already the case. Isaiah will simply bring out into the open the true spiritual condition of the people, which they have not acknowledged and which they have avoided discussing.

* Verses 9 and 10 are quoted, in whole or in part, in Matthew 13:14-15, Mark 4:12, John 12:40, and Acts 28:26-27. In these New Testament contexts also, it may seem at first as if God is deliberately preventing listeners from understanding his Word. But in each case, the situation is similar to that encountered by Isaiah himself. It is well worth looking up these NT references and comparing their contexts with Isaiah 6.

Isaiah's preaching will give struggling believers a chance to repent and change, yet it will also have the effect of provoking the prideful and self-righteous to become even more hardened and

even less receptive to God's truth. Like many of the prophets, and like Jesus himself, Isaiah will serve as something of an instrument of self-judgment. Those who call themselves believers and yet reject the Word of God when it does not please them may think that they are passing their own 'wise' judgment on God's Word, yet in reality they are rendering judgment upon themselves.

Isaiah grasps the significance of what God is calling him to do, and he cannot help asking how long this ministry of unpopular preaching will last (6:11-13). Whatever personal apprehension he may have is certainly mixed with a greater fear for his brothers and sisters. God does not and cannot tell the prophet anything but the truth: that his message of warning will have to be proclaimed until the cities are ruined, the fields ravaged, and the Lord has sent everyone away.

Thus Isaiah knows from the beginning that his ministry will be directed towards the formation of a remnant; God has already determined that the nation as a whole will not last. Isaiah's mind is immediately cleared of any delusions that he might be able to prevent what God has already determined must be. Isaiah's faithfulness is such that he never questions this.

There is, of course, a strong note of hope for the future, with God's assurance that "the holy seed will be the stump in the land". Here the stump is yet another image of the remnant, the survivors. Isaiah will have to stand by as God chops down the great tree of his people, comforted only by the knowledge that this stump, unlike normal stumps, will one day be regenerated into a better and spiritually stronger generation of servants of the living God.

Isaiah's experience here furnishes us in the church with a call to faithful preaching. Like Isaiah, we must make sure that our ministry is not motivated by outward results or popularity. We do not know what God has in store for us, either as individuals or as a congregation.

It is all too easy for us to make glib assumptions that "God wants the best for us", and to assume that God wants us to be personally prosperous, to belong to a strong, successful church, and to live in a strong, powerful country. None of these are valid assumptions, and none of them demonstrates true 'faith'. It is not 'faith' to decide for God what he will do 'for us', and it is not 'faith' for us to decide how he will teach, lead, and discipline his people. Isaiah's call to prophetic ministry is instead something much more challenging, much more intimidating, yet much grander and more worthwhile. It is also much more accessible for the average Christian.

Our worm's eye view of the universe is so limited, so self-interested, and so short-sighted, that we can never presume to know what is best. The truly faithful believer will be unreservedly prepared to do as God asks, even if we have no guarantees about the results - indeed, even if we know beforehand that nothing 'tangible' will result. This is true faith: rejoicing in following God's will because it is God's will, knowing that his will is perfect in its own way.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does God ask for a 'volunteer'? What does Isaiah's response show about the prophet's faith and state of mind? Describe what God wants Isaiah to do. Why did God want him to do this? Why does God risk discouraging Isaiah by giving him so much negative information? What goals or expectations should Isaiah have? How should we learn from Isaiah's call to ministry?

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, March 2008*
©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Five: God With Us (Isaiah 7:1-8:22)

In the midst of a crisis for God's people, Isaiah preaches a message of faith in God and hope for the future. He combines symbolic actions with prophecy and explanation, and yet God's people choose instead to trust in worldly forces. These chapters (Isaiah 7-12) also contain some noteworthy Messianic prophecies, which we can now study in their original context.

Review Of Recent Classes

The first five chapters of Isaiah introduce the prophet's message of promise and warning. Some of the themes are seen over and over again throughout the book. Much of his message centers on the need to seek and understand God personally, not relying on activity or on knowledge alone. God's desire for his people contrasts with the reality of their spiritual complacency. God uses Isaiah to prepare a remnant of spiritual survivors, through whom God will rebuild. God's people must learn to exalt God and God alone, to humble themselves, and to crush all idols.

Isaiah then recounts the time when God told him to, "Go and tell this people" (6:1-13) the message of God's holiness. He saw God on his throne, heard the seraphs calling, "holy, holy, holy", and experienced overwhelming sights and other sensations. Isaiah at once realized his uncleanness, saw the need for his sin to be atoned for, and called out "woe to me!" After his guilt was taken away in dramatic fashion, God then gave him the message he was to proclaim.

The prophet was sent to a people who were ever hearing, but never understanding. Isaiah's willingness to serve God was met with Judah's reluctance to heed God. Upon asking how long he must proclaim this critical message, the prophet learns that it will continue until the people are disciplined and dispersed. Later, a remnant will arise from the 'stump' of God's people.

The next large section of the book of Isaiah consists of a series of messages that are connected with specific events or nations in the prophet's lifetime. In many cases, the messages serve a dual purpose, in addressing an immediate spiritual need while also looking ahead to an event in the more distant future. Such is the case with this next passage.

The Lord Will Give You A Sign (Isaiah 7:1-17)

The nation of Judah faced a crisis when the Northern Kingdom joined forces with Aram (Syria) to attack their brothers to the south. God sends Isaiah to King Ahaz with a message of reassurance and hope, yet the foolish king has confidence only in worldly sources of strength. This becomes, rather surprisingly, the setting for one of Isaiah's best-known prophecies about Jesus.

This alliance against Judah causes panic and impatience in the people and in their king (7:1-2). At the time, Assyria dominated the nations and events of the entire area, and the smaller nations would waver back and forth, sometimes seeking Assyria's favor and sometimes trying to break free from its grip. On this occasion, Aram and Israel join forces, and pressure Judah to join them. Although it is not stated in Isaiah, the two neighboring nations are attempting to build an alliance against Assyria, which has been collecting large amounts of tribute* from them.

* 'Tribute', in this context, is a euphemism for extortion money paid by a smaller or weaker nation to a larger one, in return for a promise of non-aggression.

The leaders of these smaller nations often boosted their popularity by promising to resist their overlords. Judah was in the more secure position of these smaller nations, as it was the farthest away from Assyrian territory*. Yet Judah's King Ahaz preferred to ally with Assyria, a brutal empire known for its ruthless treatment both of enemies and of its own people. This in turn has angered Aram and Israel, to the point that they now choose to launch a joint attack on Judah and Jerusalem, precipitating a crisis in Judah**.

* See the map on the last page of notes. The Assyrian Empire extended a considerable distance off of the area on the map, especially to the east.

** The date of this situation is approximately 734 BC, a few years after Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6. Because the ancient nations all used dating systems much different than ours, it can be a difficult task to nail down an exact date. Many events in Isaiah's lifetime are dated by comparing the Bible's chronology with references from Assyrian chronicles. For further study of how dates in this era can be determined, see Edwin Thiele's book, *A Chronology Of The Hebrew Kings*. For a study of biblical chronology in both Old Testament and New Testament eras, see Jack Finegan's *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*.

Into this ungodly situation, God sends Isaiah to King Ahaz with a message of faith and assurance (7:3-12). God instructs the prophet to take his son Shear-Jashub with him, as a symbolic, living message to the king. Shear-Jashub is the Hebrew for 'a remnant will return'; thus Isaiah had named his son for the message he would so often proclaim in his ministry.

Isaiah and Shear-Jashub repeatedly re-assure the king, telling him to, "be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid". The king will not have to resort to alliance with the treacherous Assyrians, nor will he have to spend any money or place himself at any risk. He simply needs to trust God, who is already prepared to protect his people. Isaiah goes even further, foretelling the swift ruin of Ephraim (or Israel, or Samaria)*, and emphasizing the relative weakness of Aram**.

* Israel was often called Ephraim, since that was the most dominant in the coalition of the northern tribes. In Isaiah's era, its capital was the city of Samaria. Only 12 years after this chapter, this northern kingdom would be conquered, and its people enslaved, by Assyria. As Isaiah prophesies in verse 8, within 65 years the survivors of the northern tribes would be too scattered and weakened to retain any sense of national identity. Over the years, their descendents would become integrated with fragments of other nationalities that settled in the area, and the resulting population would eventually be known as the Samaritans.

** Aram is the ancient name for the nation of Syria, which still exists today, with the same capital (Damascus). Thus Isaiah does not foretell its destruction.

God is so gracious that he offers to grant the foolish, weak Ahaz a sign, to give him hope and assurance. Yet the faithless king brusquely rejects this offer of grace, compounding his opposition to God by covering his aversion to (or fear of) God with a pseudo-spiritual excuse. God thus use Isaiah to give the king a sign after all - and a memorable sign it turns out to be.

In the midst of fear and faithlessness, the sign of Immanuel, "God with us", is introduced (7:13-17). In words familiar to us from the gospel (Matthew 1:23), Isaiah states that a "maiden (virgin)* will be with child, and will give birth to a son". Here in Isaiah, there is much more to the prophecy, for it has an immediate importance in addition to its Messianic significance.

* The Hebrew word that Isaiah uses here is similar to our word 'maiden', in that it can refer literally to a young virgin female, or figuratively to any young female. By contrast, the Greek word for 'virgin' in Matthew 1:23 can only mean a literal virgin. Jesus' mother Mary bore him under miraculous conditions.

This is a dual prophecy of the kind that Isaiah often makes, for such a son was born soon after he issued his prophecy (see Isaiah 8:3 below for this short-term, non-miraculous event), and then of

course the Scripture finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus*. Since we are already familiar with the Messianic significance, we shall mainly look now at Isaiah's message for King Ahaz.

* This is one of a number of such dual-level prophecies in Isaiah. It is an interesting, but unanswerable, question to ask how much Isaiah himself understood about the meaning. Certainly he was well aware of its immediate meaning, and he also must have had at least a general awareness of the nature of the Messiah.

The sign for the prophet's original hearers was a simple challenge to their willingness to trust God. A child will be born soon after these words are spoken, and "before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right" (that is, while he is still very young), destruction will have come upon Aram and Israel*, ending the threat to Judah without the king or people needing to do anything. God is with his people, knows the threats to them, and already has a plan.

* By 732 BC, Assyria had ravaged both countries, had made Aram subservient, and deported many persons of the northern tribes. Israel's King Pekah was assassinated soon afterwards (*e.g.*, see 2 Kings 15:29-30).

Questions for Discussion or Study: What choices did Ahaz have in dealing with this crisis? What situations might be similar for us, as individuals or as congregations? What should we learn from these events? How is Isaiah 7:14 used in the New Testament? How is the Immanuel theme relevant to the situation in Isaiah's era? Does it have any parallel with Jesus as our Immanuel? Can the Immanuel (God with us) idea be misused?

Assyria, The Lord's Razor (Isaiah 7:18-8:10)

Over all of the secular events of this era hangs the powerful presence of the Assyrian Empire. God had already prepared to use the Assyrians to mete out discipline to his people if they needed it. Although Ahaz and most others see it only as a powerful pagan nation, Isaiah reveals that Assyria has no lasting significance of its own; it is merely a tool, a "razor", which God can use.

Isaiah uses flies and bees to depict the ways that God can use foreign powers like Egypt and Assyria for his ends (7:18-25). These images suggest noise and chaos, foreshadowing what it will be like if God allows these pagan nations to attack. Egypt and Assyria are pre-occupied with their own goals and agendas, but in reality God can use them how and when he pleases.

God has prepared Assyria to be his 'razor', which he has "hired from beyond the river"* to discipline his people if needed. Their heads, legs, and beards will be 'shaved' in that the brutal Assyrians need only to be let loose, and they will destroy and seize anything they can.

* This refers here to the Euphrates, the westernmost of the two great rivers in Mesopotamia. Nineveh, the capital and stronghold of Assyria, was on the Tigris River, to the east.

Isaiah adds further imagery to emphasize the peril from Assyria, depicting a landscape devoid of human life and human sustenance, covered only with briars and thorns. Assyria's power dwarfs that of Israel and Judah, yet its own power is in turn nothing in comparison with God's. Again the prophet is calling all the peoples of the earth to humble themselves in the sight of God.

The symbolic name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz connects the Immanuel prophecy with the warning to Ahaz, and warns anyone who would trust the powers of this world rather than God (8:1-10). This name is given to Isaiah's new son, who is the short-term fulfillment of the promise in Isaiah 7:14*. Isaiah has named two sons for messages that God has called him to proclaim.

* Verse 3's reference to 'the prophetess' refers, in context, to Isaiah's wife. The birth of Isaiah's son, unlike the virgin birth of Jesus, was not a miracle. It was, instead, a symbol of an important spiritual lesson.

The tongue-twisting name given to the prophet's newest son means roughly, "quick to the plunder", because not long after he is born, Damascus (Aram) and Samaria (Israel, Ephraim) will be viciously plundered by Assyria. There is warning too to Judah, for in handling this crisis in an ungodly fashion, they have also exposed themselves to future discipline.

In this episode, we can see two aspects of the assurance that God is with us. To the faithful, this is a great encouragement in the midst of trials and danger. To the faithless, it is a warning that nothing is hidden from God. God With Us promises us a blessing we could never earn or deserve. Yet it also confers a responsibility, for it removes any reason for trusting in this world.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What do the images of flies and bees suggest? Why does God use the image of a razor? Are these images significant to us? Why does God tell Isaiah to give his newborn son the name 'quick to the plunder'? How can this idea be reconciled with "God with us"? What are the implications of God's constant presence?

A Call To Remain Faithful (Isaiah 8:11-22)

During this period of crisis, Isaiah is practically alone in relying on God rather than trusting in earthly forces. As God reassures the prophet and exhorts him to remain firm in his faith, his words also encourage us to do likewise. Like Isaiah, the faithful believer today must develop and maintain a perspective on events that greatly differs from the viewpoint of the worldly.

In an ungodly world, it can be a challenge to wait for the Lord (8:11-17). God urges Isaiah not to give in to the worldly perspectives all around him: he should not fear what the worldly fear, but instead remember the awesome nature of God. He should not see conspiracy behind all wrongs, for the worldly are simply following their fleshly natures by living in disorder and conflict.

God's description of himself as "a stone that causes persons to stumble" (verse 14) is also used (with Isaiah 28:16) of Jesus in Romans 9:33. God is glorious beyond the power of humans to understand fully. Yet his nature clashes with our fleshly desires, causing disappointment and rejection from those without faith. Like Isaiah, we must guard against fleshly perspectives, so that we can experience and appreciate the greater blessings that come to the faithful.

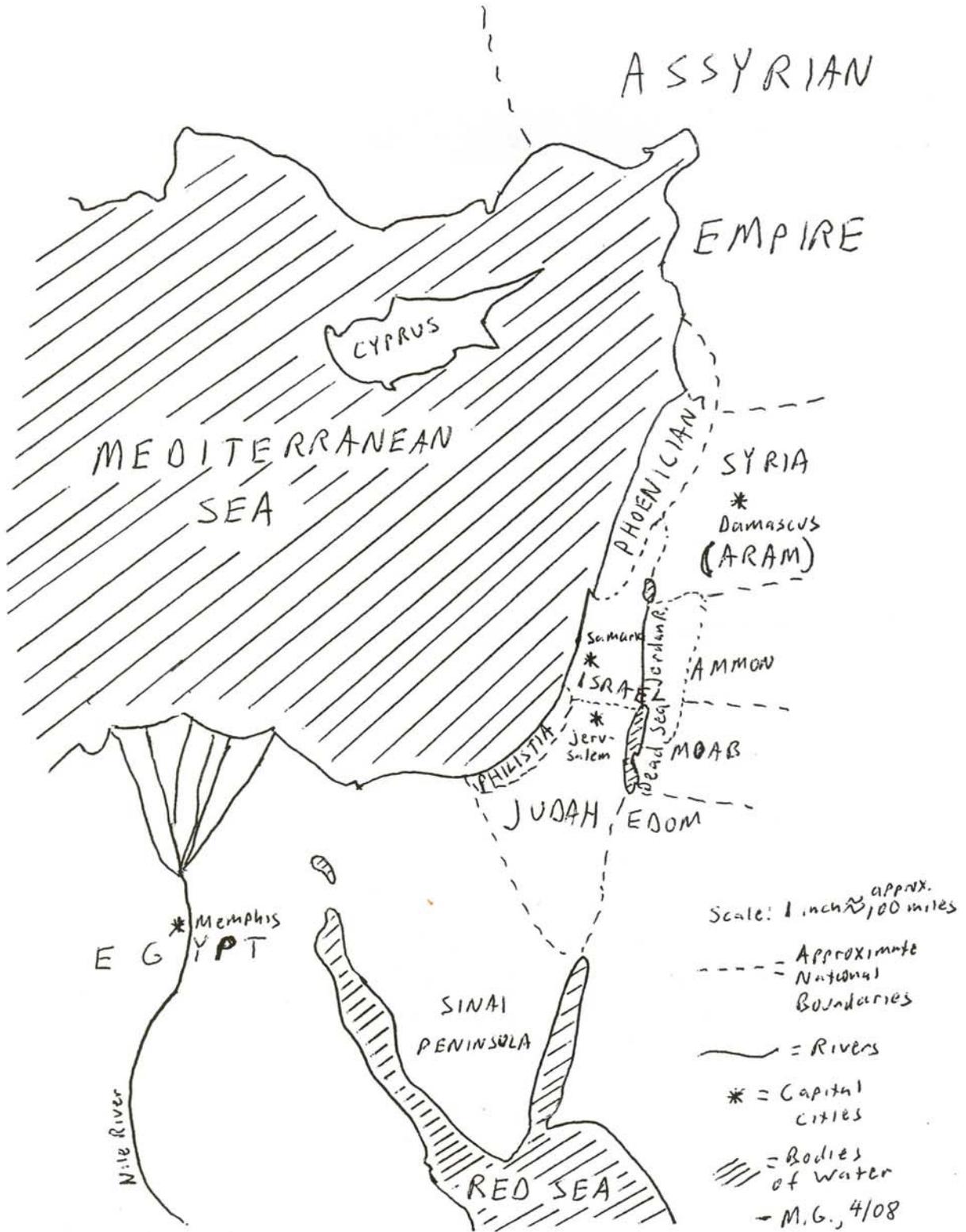
Isaiah says, "Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me" (8:18-22), recalling the start of his ministry (6:8) and emphasizing the role of his children as visible signs, living spiritual symbols. Their very names remind the people that they cannot escape God's eye, nor should they want to do so. Sadly, most of them will stumble just as God has said. Instead of believing God and his prophet, they will consult false, worldly experts, and will be thrust into darkness.

The 'Immanuel' promise means that God is always with us. God knows when we trust him, and he knows when we trust in the world. God promises to sustain us and protect us in this world, and to share his glory with us in the next. It is up to us whether we prefer to share in his divine nature, or to exchange it for a few fragments of sordid worldly 'fun' or shabby earthly fame.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What would it be like for someone such as Isaiah to endure a crisis in which no one else is trusting in God? How might we be able to relate to this? What can we learn from God's warnings to the prophet himself? What role did Isaiah's sons play in his lifetime? How can they be symbols to us?

JUDAH, ISRAEL, & THEIR NEIGHBORS

Approximately 734 BC



Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Six: To Us A Son Is Given (Isaiah 9:1-10:19)

In the midst of a national emergency, Isaiah has called God's people to trust in God rather than in worldly forces. The prophet has also warned them that failure to heed this advice will lead only to darkness. Yet, even then there will be hope, as he now explains. The day will come when the darkness of this earth will be swept away by the great light that comes from God.

Review Of Recent Classes

Isaiah received the call to prophetic ministry when God directed him to "Go and tell this people" (6:1-13) that they were suffering from spiritual blindness and lack of understanding. Only a few years later, the prophet was deeply involved in God's plans for teaching his people during a time of national crisis. The six chapters Isaiah 7-12 are all originally set in this same context*.

* The date is approximately 734 BC. See last week's notes for more detailed historical background.

With Judah facing attack from a coalition of neighbors, God sends Isaiah to King Ahaz to tell him that God is with his people (7:1-8:22). Despite Ahaz's pride and lack of faith, God promises him a sign - the sign of Immanuel, 'God with us'. The king is warned not to seek help from earthly forces, but to trust instead in God's presence. The promise is confirmed in the short-term by the birth of a child, and will find its complete fulfillment later in the birth of the Messiah.

God is about to use Assyria as his 'razor' to discipline both his people and their enemies. Isaiah also uses the imagery of flies and bees to symbolize the noise and confusion that will befall those whom God must humble. Then comes the short-term fulfillment of the Immanuel promise, with the birth of Isaiah's son Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. This name means "quick to the plunder", because the Assyrians will soon plunder Judah's enemies, as Isaiah had foretold.

As a faithful believer amidst rampant ungodliness and folly, Isaiah himself is urged by God to remain faithful. Unlike impatient, faithless Judah and its king, Isaiah is willing to wait for the Lord instead of resorting to rash worldly actions. Isaiah also presents himself, and his two symbolically-named sons, to the people as living reminders of God's promises and his warnings.

A Great Light (Isaiah 9:1-7)

The vivid contrast between darkness and light makes this passage one of the most memorable of Isaiah's Messianic prophecies. While the description of the Messiah and his qualities is already familiar to most believers, we can gain additional insight from seeing this well-known passage in its original setting, the spiritual and national crisis that takes place during Isaiah's lifetime.

The promise of "no more gloom" (9:1-5) would surely have been welcome in the midst of a situation that had suddenly become threatening and demoralizing. But this promise looks far beyond Isaiah's struggling generation, into the Messianic future. The promise to honor Galilee comes as no surprise to today's believers, but in Isaiah's time - and long afterward - it would have seemed more natural to call it, as the prophet does, a place where the people walk in darkness.

As one of the northernmost areas of Israel, Galilee was significantly influenced by Gentile cultures*. It was also on an invasion route used by Assyria and other attackers, and thus suffered

more than its share of hardship and loss when the nation was disciplined. While we naturally associate Galilee with Jesus, the choice of it as the place thus honored is interesting, since God deliberately avoided any of the more prosperous or more socially influential areas.

* Much later, in Jesus' lifetime, the area was even more heavily populated with Gentiles and with Samaritans, who were half-Jewish and half-Gentile.

The image of those walking in darkness suddenly seeing a great light is a metaphor for the light that Jesus brings into all of our lives. He is the one source of genuine light and truth in a world full of lies, frauds, and broken promises. Galilee was not truly more sinful or backwards than other parts of the nation; it only seemed 'darker' to those who thought more highly of themselves than they should have. Every person in the world always stands in equal need of God's light.

Isaiah depicts the people rejoicing as they would at the harvest, when a sudden abundance makes months of waiting and working seem worthwhile. God's people would have to wait several centuries to see the complete fulfillment of this prophecy, yet it is also meant to encourage those in Isaiah's time with genuine faith. They could know that, no matter what they had to endure, no matter how little progress they saw in their own lifetimes, that their faith was not in vain.

We ought to develop this same attitude. We have seen the Messiah, a blessing not given even to Isaiah himself. So if God does not choose to fulfill our dreams of spiritual 'great things', we have no reason for complaint. Many believers of great faith - indeed, whole generations of believers - have never experienced the benefits of their labors in the Lord. We have the Messiah Jesus, we have a relationship with God himself, and we have a certain eternal future to look forward to. Let that be enough for us to devote ourselves diligently to whatever ministry he prepares for us.

Isaiah also appeals to the yearning to throw off oppressors*. Only rarely in their history were the ancient Jews not threatened by one or more hostile powers. Ever since the time of Christ, gospel believers have been living in a world hostile to their beliefs. The Messiah does not stop earthly persecutors and tormentors, but he renders them spiritually impotent, incapable of pulling us away from him unless we choose to do so ourselves. He also reveals the useless and deceitful nature of this world's powers and authorities, so that we need no longer fear them in our hearts.

* Isaiah makes reference to 'the day of Midian's defeat', bringing to mind one of their most ancient oppressors. The Midianites regularly attacked and plundered Israel during the era of the Judges.

In this context, we receive the promise that to us "a child is born", and "a son is given" (9:6-7). Though this will find its complete fulfillment in a Son born to a couple from Galilee, this child is truly given to all of us. Since the need is universal, so is the gift. Thus all can rejoice in the names of praise by which he is called - Wonderful, Counselor, and all the rest.

This child has an everlasting reign*, not on this earth but in eternity. Thus the prophet openly appeals to those who understand God, hoping that they can appreciate the scale on which God is operating. He never had the intention of blessing Israel alone, or of making Israel a dominant fleshly kingdom that would rule others in this world. He had always planned something much more glorious for them, and much more accessible for us - an eternal kingdom.

* In a more limited sense, future King Hezekiah brought a similar hope to the faithful in Judah, so some commentators see in Hezekiah a short-term fulfillment of this prophecy. Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, was probably a small child at the time. There are some points to this, yet Hezekiah, while faithful and humble, did not merit many of the praises this passage. There is also nothing about his reign that would clearly connect him or any blessing with Galilee. Yet in other respects it is not unreasonable to suppose that Isaiah and God saw in the royal son, then still a child, a gracious blessing to suffering believers.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What significance is there here to light and darkness? Why is Galilee singled out for blessing? Why is the promise phrased in terms of the birth of a son? Is it possible that this is a dual-layer prophecy that had both a short-term and a long-term fulfillment? How are the names given to the child important?

The Lord Has Sent A Message (Isaiah 9:8-10:11)

Yet the sad truth in the present situation is that almost everyone is acting faithlessly. Northern Israel plots against its own brothers in Judah, while Aram and Assyria are set on violence and plunder. Judah follows the lead of its weak king, panicking and turning to the world for help. God must use Isaiah to reprove all of them and to appeal to those who are still faithful.

The prophet contrasts their human pride with God's divine anger (9:8-21). Both are powerful, but our pride is unjustified, while God has the right to be displeased with the refusal to learn what is good for us. Pride is especially destructive to our relationship with God, because our pride blocks out the things he wants to tell us, and blinds us to our sins and our need for grace.

God warns that he will cut off 'both head and tail' from the people. These are two major sources of false hope and false security: the leaders who mislead, and the prophets who lie. Both are problems we can see in any era. Power corrupts all who desire it, and leaders in every era quickly learn how easy it is to deceive others. False prophets, likewise, abound in any era. Telling the crowd what it wants to hear is the surest way to popularity and privilege.

Because the people of Isaiah's generation so willingly embraced such things, they are barely aware of their desperate spiritual condition. Even after the first stages of discipline, God's hand will still be upraised against them, because his goal is not to punish, but to cure. The harder our hearts become, and the more closed our minds are, the more firmly he has to discipline us.

The rampant injustice and oppression in Judah should have been a warning (10:1-4). Their self-centered pride is manifested in the way that they accept without question the privileges of the wealthy, the abuses of the powerful, and the sufferings of the weak and poor. So too, our own society complacently accepts institutions that are inherently corrupt and dishonest. Only in the church can we - or at last should we - find relief.

God pronounces woe upon his people, for Assyria will provide harsh discipline. But woe to the Assyrians as well (10:5-11), for their time will be much shorter. The Assyrian agenda included world domination and countless acts of brutality and indulgence, but God's agenda overruled theirs once their usefulness was at an end.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is pride so destructive spiritually? How did it lead to other problems in Judah of Isaiah's day? What should we learn from this? Why is God's anger at them justified? Why does he single out the leaders and prophets?

Reminder Of God's Overwhelming Strength & Wisdom (Isaiah 10:12-19)

Regardless of how weak, flawed, or sinful human beings are, God never loses his strength or his wisdom. When we lose sight of God and look only to the world for help, we can never find any lasting source of security or guidance. We should keep God ever at the center of our thoughts and our perspective, so that we can draw confidence from knowing our transcendent Creator.

For a while, the Assyrians will be allowed to rule and dominate without mercy or wisdom, but Assyria's turn is coming, too (10:12-14). They are convenient tools for God, but this does not excuse their sins. They are useful only because their own nature, brutish, prideful, and ignorant, makes them so predictable. They and their king are a shocking example of willful human pride that blinds them to their own true nature and to their own limitations.

The Assyrians - as have those of every nation that has enjoyed a time of dominance - were convinced that the 'gods' had blessed them. They persuaded themselves that they would not be able to enjoy such success unless they deserved it. How ironic that it was not the false gods they worshiped who gave them these 'blessings', but the living God, who allowed them to rule and dominate in spite of who they were and how they lived, not because of these. They are hardly, of course, the only ones ever to make such a drastic misappraisal of themselves.

Watching the ascendancy of the bestial Assyrians is a challenge for the faithful*, whom Isaiah thus urges to keep the proper perspective (10:15-19). As an ax cannot raise itself, a nation like Assyria cannot rise to power unless God allows it to. The world is always full of evildoers and liars who gain wealth and power, often without a specific reason. So we always have a reminder of how little hope there is to found in this world's sources of apparent strength and authority.

* The book of Habakkuk, set in a similar situation shortly before the fall of Judah, provides a detailed look at the dilemmas facing a faithful believer in such times. Habakkuk lived to see the Babylonians destroy and enslave Judah in 586 BC.

The prophet depicts God as an unquenchable fire, with nothing able to stand in his path. This was true in Isaiah's day, as the time neared for unavoidable discipline that would end only when God willed. It is true now, as the world inches nearer to its final end. Whether we are called to judgment days from now or millennia from now, God's absolute authority is just as certain.

Isaiah never questioned the futility of opposing God, and he could always remember his memorable personal encounter with God. He knew that events and persons considered important by the world are trivial in God's sight. Only by keeping a clear-minded focus on spiritual reality could Isaiah look past the dismaying, frightening, and sordid events taking place around him.

Only by developing such a perspective today can believers see how God works in their lives and the lives of others. Only by learning to see with "the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18) can we appreciate what is truly important, truly glorious, and truly beautiful.

Then, despite everything, we always have God's promise that there will be "no more gloom". We can enjoy this assurance now, in knowing that our sins are forgiven and our guilt removed. And the Day will come when believers will never again have to experience gloom of any kind.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How could God allow Assyria to have such undeserved power and wealth? Why did he not correct their attitude earlier? How did God expect someone like Isaiah to endure Assyria's period of dominance? How can we develop the attitudes that Isaiah teaches us to have?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2008
©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Seven: From The Stump Of Jesse (Isaiah 10:20-12:6)

Once again, the prophet follows a message of stern warning with a prophecy of great hope. This time, Isaiah expounds at length on two of the most important aspects of God's long-term plans for his people. First, he assures the people that there will always be survivors, a remnant, no matter what else happens. Then, it is from this remnant that the great Branch will arise.

Review Of Recent Classes

In the midst of a crisis in which Judah is threatened with invasion by two of its neighbors, Isaiah warns against taking fleshly action, promising instead the sign of Immanuel, "God with us" (7:1-8:22). The names of the prophet's two sons make them living reminders of God's providence.

Building on this symbolism, the prophet testifies about the Messianic future, when "To us a Son is given" (9:1-10:19). This great light will appear out of Galilee, a region of figurative darkness. Although Isaiah's generation will not see it, the child is born to all, and to them too, for he will make worthwhile the faith, the waiting, and the sacrifice of many generations of believers.

Meanwhile, the Lord has sent a message to those who think themselves wiser than God. Human pride is never justified, and when not stopped it inevitably meets with divine anger. Even Assyria, useful tool to God that it will be, faces a future of woe because its pride leads it to inflate its own worthiness and importance. The prophet reminds us all of God's overwhelming strength and wisdom, which puts to shame all human pretensions. Developing this proper perspective will help us to appreciate what God is doing.

The Survivors Will Return (Isaiah 10:20-34)

There are many times in Scripture when God's people are disciplined in ways that reduce their numbers. But God always preserves a remnant, a carefully protected group of survivors, which he then uses to build a better future for his people. Isaiah explains how and why this principle works, knowing that God is planning to use the same idea on a broader and more spiritual level.

The return of the remnant (10:20-23) is of special importance to Isaiah because it ties together several themes that are crucial to an understanding of God's nature and character. Long before Isaiah, God used remnants to rebuild and strengthen the faithful. Noah, Joshua and Caleb, Gideon, and many others illustrate the many ways and times that God has refocused on a small group of believers when the vast majority went astray. Jesus himself drew a remnant from the people of Israel*, those few who accepted the Messiah as God intended him to be.

* This is a major topic of discussion in Romans 9-11. In those chapters, Paul quotes Isaiah extensively!

One reason for God to use a remnant is to help his people to stop relying on the wrong things. God loves to bless his people, but when blessings come too easily, it too often happens that the people take them for granted, or even demand more. Worse, they have a tendency to put their trust and reliance in the very things that are most dangerous for them, just as Isaiah says here.

Despite it all, God promises Isaiah's generation both a return to the land and a return to God. The return to the land was a one-time promise, which would not be fulfilled until long after Isaiah's death*, and it was also the less important of the promised returns. God's real desire for the nation of Israel was for them to return to him. He knew all along that, though they were as numerous as 'the sand by the sea', only a remnant - a small fraction - would be truly faithful.

* A series of Babylonian attacks started in 606 BC, when the first group of exiles was captured. Judah fell in 586 BC, with most of the nation then being deported. The remnant began to return in 536 BC (after the 70 year period prophesied by Jeremiah), under Persian rule.

There is a spiritual remnant in any era, as spiritual steadfastness is never easy for mortal beings. Genuine Christianity is never popular with the majority of any nation, era, or culture, because it challenges too many things dear to the flesh. Yet the promise to the faithful always remains: since God will never forsake his people, there will always at least be a remnant* under his care.

* In church history, there are some eras in which all 'mainline' bodies of believers may seem to have become completely apostate. This does not mean that there were not individual believers who were genuinely seeking the truth. There are also many examples of groups in all eras of history who sought to return Christianity to the New Testament pattern and/or who sought to return the teachings Scripture to a place above human tradition and authority. Even when these groups did not last long, they provide witness of God's faithfulness. He will always seek out and provide for those whose hearts truly desire him.

But before the promise of the remnant can be fulfilled, there will first be destruction. God prefers to start over with a small remnant, rather than to endure the unending idolatry and pride of a large body, no matter how superficially strong it may be.

Although Assyria will be the instrument of harsh discipline, Isaiah appeals to the faithful not to fear or worry about Assyria in itself (10:24-34). God has already planned to discipline the Assyrians as soon as his purpose for them is accomplished. The one disciplined last will not be the one who laughs. So the burden is necessary, but it will be lifted, for God has so promised.

Assyria's strength, wealth, and power will be chopped off like boughs and branches being lopped off from a tree. And here is the crucial difference between God's discipline and his judgment, for Assyria will never rise again, while God's people will. The stump of Assyria will remain just a stump, but the stump of Judah will, contrary to all nature, bud and give life to a new and more glorious realization of God's people - as Isaiah is about to explain.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What other remnants were there before Isaiah's time? What did they have in common? What was different about them? What lessons did they teach? Why will Assyria be permanently judged, but Judah preserved as a remnant?

A Branch From The Stump (Isaiah 11:1-16)

Even when the people of God may seem to have been reduced to nothing, God can always raise up a remnant. The image of a tree stump is deliberately chosen here, to remind us that it is not our effort, our determination, or our faithfulness that allows God to do this. Only God can bring forth life out of a dead stump, and only God can transform the very nature of our lives.

Isaiah's prophecy of the fruitful Branch connects the earlier Branch prophecy (from Isaiah 4) with his teaching of the remnant (11:1-5). The Branch here has a spirit of wisdom and understanding, and a desire to see righteousness and justice prevail. These are exemplified

perfectly by the Messiah, the Branch from Nazareth, and they are also the ideals that God hopes to instill in his remnant.

The prophet also emphasizes the contrast between Judah and Assyria. Both will be stumps, but Assyria will simply rot away after being chopped off. The stump of Jesse* will miraculously produce this faithful Branch, after it (the remnant) has undergone the necessary discipline**.

* Jesse was David's father, so this expression is used metaphorically to refer to the descendants of David. The Messiah would come from David's physical line, and the remnant from his spiritual heirs.

** For yet another parallel, see the teachings in Hebrews (e.g. 2:10-18, 5:7-10) on the discipline Jesus himself had to endure while living in a human body.

Further, the Branch (the Messiah, the Christ) will be a banner for the peoples* (11:6-16). With this message originally being proclaimed amidst a tense military confrontation, Isaiah's images of peace become even more striking than they are in themselves. If the wolf and the lamb can live together, if the calf and lion can co-exist, then by comparison it should be possible for humans or nations to address their problems without resorting to violence and death. As simple as this principle is, it is impossible to realize except through the Branch. Sadly, even many who believe in the Branch find it difficult to trust him, rather than physical force, in times of crisis.

* Note the plural - the entire message in this passage emphasizes that the Branch is for everyone.

Thus the nations will rally to the Branch - not, of course, as geographic or political entities, but as individual believers from every country and culture. This extraordinary gathering of exiles points out the nature of the true church of Jesus. It is, by nature and design, a remnant. The church is no longer a physical remnant, but a spiritual remnant. Every person of every race in every land was created to seek God, but only a few find 'the narrow road' to God's grace.

The remnant is made up of individuals, not of groups. The church consists of those who individually have chosen to follow the Branch. You do not become part of the Branch by joining a church; but when you become one with the Branch you are added to the church. It is thus the Branch, not the church, that should be exalted, and that should be preached to the world.

There is always a highway open to the remnant. They can come from anywhere, even hostile nations like Assyria and Edom and Philistia. Our nation, our race, our culture, our gender, all count neither for nor against us; they are all irrelevant when it comes to getting on the highway of the remnant. Genuine Christianity has no connection with or debt to any culture or nation in the world, for it rises above the things of this world to meet needs that this world can never meet.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah call Assyria and Judah stumps? What contrast is he making? What significance does the 'Branch' image have here? What connection does it have with the remnant? Why is peace an inherent characteristic of the remnant? What does the prophet mean with his image of the 'highway'?

God Is My Salvation (Isaiah 12:1-6)

This heartfelt song of praise glorifies God as our one and only source of life and hope. It acknowledges the justice of God's discipline, and praises God for his comfort and salvation. The imagery of water also makes reference to God as a giver of life, both physical life and spiritual life. In this song, Isaiah also encapsulates for us the ideal attitude towards God.

Isaiah understands the joy of salvation (12:1-3) as few others have ever done. As his words and his experience both indicate, the joy of salvation is accompanied by the awareness of God's holiness. Isaiah fully appreciates what it means to be in God's hands, for he has seen and felt God's righteous anger and fearful majesty. So too, in our own relationship with God, we only fully appreciate what God has done if we also understand the dangers he has delivered us from.

The prophet's expression, "the wells of salvation", makes use of the frequent symbolism of water as a source of life and sustenance. Jesus himself would later use the expression "living water" to call the lost to him for a life-giving drink of God's grace. Isaiah's image suggests a weary, thirsty traveler who has finally found a source of precious water that can make all the difference.

An appreciation for God's salvation is followed naturally by a desire to make it known (12:4-6). Isaiah is moved naturally, not out of compulsion, to "proclaim that his name is exalted". His motivation is similar to that of anyone who has good, exciting, or interesting news to share. It is natural for us to repeat and discuss the things that matter to us or interest us.

When believers feel a need to use coercion or guilt as a motivation to proclaim the gospel, this is a sign that they do not understand the gospel. Even Jeremiah, who found his own message discouraging and unpopular, said, "But if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:9). Grasping the mere truth of God's Word was enough to motivate him to teach the truth, regardless of the consequences.

And when we also truly understand, as Isaiah does, that God has done 'glorious things' for us, how much more willingly we will speak of God without prompting or coercion. It is only because we have such a dim and worldly understanding of what constitutes 'glorious things' that we so often allow God's greatest gifts and blessings to pass unnoticed. Isaiah calls us to rise above all that, and he also assures us that it is possible.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How can we better appreciate the joy of salvation, for its own sake? What qualities of God can help us with this? What does Isaiah intend to connote with the image of a well? What motivations to proclaim God's glory do we see in Isaiah? Can we instill the same motivation in ourselves?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2008

©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Eight: The Day Of The Lord Is Coming (Isaiah 13:1-14:32)

God's justice and righteousness are every bit as integral to his character as compassion and grace are. In the next several chapters of Isaiah, the prophet will proclaim God's judgment against some of Israel's pagan neighbors. If God gives grace to believers, he also judges unbelievers. The series of oracles starts with one directed at Babylon, then a rising power.

Review Of Isaiah So Far

After setting forth his basic message and main themes (Isaiah 1-5), Isaiah describes his call to prophetic ministry (Isaiah 6), which gave him an unforgettable impression of God's majesty and righteousness. Later, with Judah under attack, God sends Isaiah with a series of messages to the king and the people (Isaiah 7-12). These served a dual purpose, urging Isaiah's original listeners to stop panicking and to trust God, while also providing some insight on the Messianic future.

The sign of Immanuel, "God with us" (7:1-8:22), gave hope to the faithful in Isaiah's own time, and was fulfilled in a deeper and miraculous way through Jesus. In a period of darkness and fear, Isaiah promised that "to us a Son is given" (9:1-10:19), providing assurance that God would use the trials and worries of the present as part of building something much better for the future.

Isaiah now turns to one of his key themes, the remnant, stating that it will come from "the stump of Jesse" (Isaiah 10:20-12:6). Judah would be taken captive, but survivors would return to the land, foreshadowing the even more important return to God by the true remnant of his people. Destruction would have to come first, but then the promise of a remnant would be fulfilled. Therefore the people should not worry about Assyria. Although it seemed at the time to be an overpowering threat, it was just a tool for God to use.

Both Assyria and Judah will be reduced to stumps by the discipline God has in store. Assyria's 'stump' will just rot away, but a Branch, the Messiah, will arise from the 'stump' of Judah. This fruitful Branch will serve as a banner, a rallying point, for those of any nation, any culture, any time, who want to know God. Isaiah thus praises God as his salvation. He feels the joy of salvation even though the present is fearful, and he is eager to make known God and his will to others. He rejoices in God for God's sake, and rejoices in God's will just because it is God's will.

Next, the book of Isaiah moves on to a lengthy collection of messages about the pagan nations surrounding Judah and Israel (Isaiah 13-21).

An Oracle Concerning Babylon (Isaiah 13:1-22)

In Isaiah's lifetime, Babylon had not yet regained the position of world power that it would have in the days of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. But its proud past and burning ambition were well-known, and the Babylonians constantly dreamed of earthly glory. One irony of this vision is that Babylon's downfall is foretold even before it attained the superpower status that it sought.

God's future judgment of Babylon is near by his terms, so that Isaiah already hears "a noise on the mountains" (13:1-8) as God prepares punishment. Just as Babylon will one day swoop down

from the north to discipline Judah and other nations, so also there will be others from faraway lands to bring down Babylon in its turn. Such is God's transcendence that he says to "wail, for the day of the Lord* is near", though it would not happen for almost 200 years of human time.

* Another example of the prophetic use of the phrase, "the day of the Lord". Here, it refers to the sudden destruction of Babylon in 538 BC. See the week two notes for more on this phrase in the prophetic books.

A brief overview of Babylonian history can help put into context Isaiah's prophecy about Babylon, as well as the reasons for it. Even in Isaiah's lifetime, the city of Babylon could trace its history back almost 1500 years, to its founding sometime before 2200 BC*. The city first rose to prominence when Hammurabi, one of its kings, established control over most of the Mesopotamian valley, and declared himself the ruler of a Babylonian Empire; this took place in the first half of the 1700s BC**. Hammurabi's legal code*** was widely influential, and it is one of the earliest comprehensive set of laws that has been preserved.

* Babylon was thus founded well before the birth of Abraham.

** About the time when Jacob and his family moved to Egypt.

*** Skeptical authors often claim that the Law of Moses was inspired by the Code of Hammurabi, but the two sets of laws are different in nature. The Code is largely concerned with civil conduct and property rights, though there are some superficial similarities. Its greatest historical significance lies in it being the earliest known example of a set of unchangeable laws, to which even the king was subject.

In this era, Babylon became a respected and admired source of commerce, culture, and government. But after Hammurabi's reign ended, his Empire* began slowly to decline and to lose its power over neighboring regions. The city was sacked and raided by the Hittites shortly after 1600 BC, and Babylon's territory was then ruled by various foreign nations, although the city itself remained an important administrative center.

* Hammurabi's empire is usually called Babylonia, and the same name is often given to the region during the era in which it was ruled by other nations.

In Isaiah's era, Babylonia was under the rule of Assyria, as was most of the region. In 626 BC, Babylon's King Nabopolassar rebelled against Assyria, declaring Babylon to be an independent Empire*. In the ensuing war, Babylon's military proved superior. When Assyria's capital, Nineveh, fell in 612 BC, Babylon had completely replaced Assyria as the region's superpower.

* Usually called the Neo-Babylonian Empire, to distinguish it from the earlier one.

Babylon's future fall will seem as if the heavens are trembling (13:9-22). The images of celestial upheaval (*e.g.* the stars and sun darkened) are not literal, but express the feelings of those who will witness the fall of a mighty and seemingly invincible nation. It will feel much the same to the Babylonians, with their sense of false security. The sudden end to their arrogance will be all the more devastating, for the more pride one has, the greater is the fall when God decides that it is time for humbling. This, in prophecy, is the impact of "the day of the Lord".

God indicates that he plans to stir up the ancient nation of the Medes* to deal with Babylon someday, so that when the time comes there will be no chance for Babylon to survive. The prophet's imagery depicts a city so desolate that only animals occupy it, as an expression of how complete its fall will be.

* Who, with their allies the Persians, would invade and conquer Babylon in 538 BC.

In all this, God has foreseen and made arrangements for events far into the future. He has not, in so doing, taken away any individual's free will - quite the contrary, since Isaiah has so clearly invited anyone, anywhere to become part of the remnant. It is simply not that difficult for God to foresee the general direction of human history. Indeed, his people were so fleshly and so complacent that it was only by an outpouring of grace and mercy that he was able to hold off drastically disciplining them for so long.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why would Isaiah prophesy about a country that was not a great power in his era? Why has God already decided to discipline Babylon? How much of the future did God foresee? How much of it could Isaiah understand? Are there lessons for us in Babylon's history?

Rejoicing Over The Broken Rod (Isaiah 14:1-23)

From the viewpoint of the people of God, Babylon would turn out to be merely one more rod, one more tool, for God to use. They would have to endure years of oppression from Babylon, but in the end they would have the satisfying experience of watching mighty Babylon fall while little Judah was restored to life. The imagery in these verses illustrates both sides of this.

This warning of doom for Babylon is also an expression of God's compassion on the house of Jacob*, that is, his people (14:1-2). Isaiah pictures God's people turning the tables, being honored and served by other nations, instead of being subservient and persecuted as they so often had been. This would come true in a limited sense in the return from exile, when the powerful Persian government would open up their own resources to help rebuild the nation**. It also became true in an intangible, but even more important, sense through the Messiah. The universe is Jesus' rightful dominion, and all will bow to him someday, even if they refuse to do so now.

* As so often in the prophets, Isaiah uses a person to stand for a nation. The association of Jacob with the nation of Israel also makes implicit reference to the ways in which the people so often fought against God's will for them (see the derivation of the name Israel in Genesis 32:22-32).

** See, for example, Ezra 1 and Nehemiah 2. It was Persia's policy to befriend smaller and weaker nations that posed no threat, in order to gain their goodwill and loyalty.

The future opportunity to "taunt" the fallen Babylonians will allow the people to rejoice over the broken rod of the oppressor (14:3-21). The relief of the oppressed will be so great that Isaiah portrays even the trees celebrating Babylon's collapse. This relief and joy is paralleled by the drastic fall of a powerful nation, and both are magnified by the sudden change in fortunes that Babylon's fall will involve. Yet to God it was certain, at least eventually. As Isaiah grimly but truthfully says, the grave awaits even the world's leaders and rulers; and when they die, none of their worldly power or privileges will be able to help them at all.

And so their drastic fall will see their arrogant pride and ruthless ambition duly punished. Isaiah's description of their pride is so vivid that verses 12-15 are sometimes seen as a depiction of Satan himself*. Like all nations who considered themselves to be destined for permanent glory and unparalleled prosperity, all of their boasting and selfishness will come to nothing.

* Indeed, Satan has the same kind of pride, to an even greater extreme. Thus the imagery in these verses could in a sense be descriptive of him as well, though that is not their actual context.

God closes the oracle against Babylon with a declaration that reiterates a point Isaiah has made previously (14:22-23). As would be the case with Assyria (see, for example, chapter 10), Babylon's collapse would be complete and final. It would have no offspring, no descendants, no future. Unlike Judah or Israel, there would be no remnant to carry on the spirit and values of Babylon in a new form - for Babylon was simply a worldly nation that stood only for its own glory and power. God's people, even when they struggle with sin and idolatry, still stand for something better and lasting. Thus they can know that their sufferings need not be fruitless.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does the destruction of Babylon show God's compassion on his people? Why will the rejoicing over Babylon's fall be so great? What made them so terribly prideful? What should Christians learn from these verses?

Assyria & Philistia (Isaiah 14:24-32)

Assyria and Philistia had also done more than their share to harm God's people. While they too, like Babylon, often served as God's agents of discipline, this did not excuse the eagerness with which they also killed, looted, and destroyed. Yet God's people could know, even in the midst of their own spiritual struggles, that the time of judgment would come also for these foes.

The judgment on Assyria that Isaiah pronounces here (14:24-27) re-emphasizes what he has already said about the Assyrians. They will be allowed to rule and dominate for a time, but then their yoke will be taken away from Israel, Judah, and all the others they have oppressed. Assyria was not, and never would be, the focal point of history, but only a small part of God's plans for the whole world. Once they had played their part, it would be time for them to go. Believers and unbelievers alike would do well to accept this humbling truth about time and history.

Isaiah also issues a judgment on the Philistines, Judah's long-time neighbors and foes (14:28-32). Isaiah's warning to them not to rejoice prematurely seems to be in response to King Ahaz's death. The enmity between Philistia and Judah was such that almost any bad news from Judah would likely have been seen as 'good news' in Philistia. The cloud of smoke from the north is Babylon, which later, under King Nebuchadnezzar, would end Philistia's independence permanently*.

* The Philistines as a people were scattered, and eventually they ceased to exist.

Though dealing with events of long ago, Isaiah 13-14 has applications for us. While we should caution ourselves that God deals with individuals more so than with nations, the lessons are still significant. Pride, blindness to sin, and earthly ambitions are still deadly to our spiritual well-being. And the promise of compassion on the faithful still stands, for "the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10).

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah add another condemnation of Assyria here? (What is added to his previous statements?) Why does Philistia deserve punishment? What general lessons should we learn from Isaiah 13-14? Should we apply them to individuals, to churches, or on a larger scale?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2008
©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Nine: One Who In Judging Seeks Justice (Isaiah 15:1-17:14)

Continuing his series of pronouncements about the various nations of his era, Isaiah declares that God's discipline will also come upon Moab and upon Damascus (that is, Aram, or Syria). Moab is brought down by its pride, while the fate of Damascus is connected with that of Israel. All the raging of the nations and their rulers fades to nothing before the power of God.

Review Of Recent Classes

In Isaiah 7-12, we see an extended example of Isaiah's prophetic ministry. With Judah under attack from its neighbors Israel (Ephraim) and Aram (Syria), God sends Isaiah to urge the people to trust in God, while also explaining some important teachings about the Messiah who would come in the future. This is the setting of Isaiah's promise of Immanuel, "God with us" (7:1-8:22), and his prophecy that "to us a Son is given" (9:1-10:19). He also promises that from the stump, or ruins, of Jesse (David's line, that is, Judah), a remnant will be preserved (10:20-12:6).

Next, Isaiah 13-21 contains a series of oracles, or pronouncements, about the nations of Isaiah's era. First, the day of the Lord is coming for Babylon (Isaiah 13:1-14:32). In this oracle, Isaiah predicts the nation's fall even though it has not yet regained its former status as a great power. Isaiah hears 'a noise on the mountains', for its punishment is already in preparation. Babylon - once the region's dominant power in Hammurabi's day, some 1000 years before Isaiah - was then under Assyrian rule, but it was well on its way to challenging Assyria for dominance.

Babylon is useful to God as a rod of discipline, but soon it too will be broken, in part to show God's compassion on his people, Jacob. Isaiah describes the degree of rejoicing over Babylon's fall by depicting even the trees taunting the prideful, overly ambitious nation and its kings. Assyria and Philistia also come in for their share of warning and discipline, for indeed God is the judge of all those who do not humble themselves and exalt him alone. In applying these verses, we should remember above all the danger that pride poses in our relationship with God. For God's primary concern is not with nations or other faceless groups, but with individual hearts.

Destroyed In A Night (Isaiah 15:1-9)

Like so many nations and individuals, Israel's neighbor Moab* was filled with pride and self-satisfaction. But Isaiah warns that destruction can and will come upon the country quickly, and without warning. After all, if powerful nations like Babylon and Assyria can exist only by God's grace, then a smaller nation such as Moab would do well to take warning - but it didn't.

* See the map given with the notes for week five, and see also below.

Using an image we have seen before (see Isaiah 7:20), the prophet depicts Moab as a nation in which every head has been shaved, and every beard cut off, to symbolize complete humbling (15:1-4). Destruction will also be sudden: Isaiah says that Ar and Kir, two leading cities, will each be destroyed in a single night. Likewise, he refers to several other locations throughout the country, showing how devastation will sweep suddenly across the whole land.

In secular history, Moab is not as significant as Babylon, Assyria, or even Israel. Yet for centuries its history was closely intertwined with that of God's people in the Old Testament, and indeed the Moabites were closely related to the Israelites*. Moab occupied most of the portion of land on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, directly across from Judah. Its territory was relatively stable for hundreds of years.

* The Moabites were descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew, as is recounted in Genesis 19:30-38. It was not uncommon for Moabites and Israelites to intermarry, with Ruth being the best-known example.

Moab was one of the neighboring nations that David defeated, and he made Moab subject to Israel (e.g. 2 Samuel 8:2, 1 Chronicles 18:2). In the Divided Kingdom era, Moab apparently was subject to the Northern Kingdom until the death of King Ahab, and then Moab's King Mesha rebelled against Israel and Judah. Moab's resulting defeat is described in 2 Kings 3:1-27 and 2 Chronicles 20:1-30*. From then on, Moab was hostile to Israel, launching raids when possible (see 2 Kings 13:20-21), and later helping Babylon in an attack on Judah (2 Kings 24:2).

* Moab's own perspective on some of these events is found on the Mesha Stele (also called the Moabite Stone), a monument discovered at ancient Dibon. As is the case with the records of many ancient nations, it tends to record only Moabite victories, and thus the inscription glorifies Mesha for his revolt, without mentioning what it cost Moab.

Moab passes from history during the sixth century BC, and by the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem the Moabite people are no more*. While the nation was not prominent enough for ancient historians to record its final fall precisely, the historical record implies that its end came in the same era in which some of Isaiah's other prophecies were fulfilled.

* Their territory was taken over by various Arab tribes, as is reflected, for example, in Nehemiah 4:7. Today, the territory once held by Moab is part of the nation of Jordan.

Isaiah graphically depicts their flight and lamentation (15:5-9). With considerable geographical detail, he describes how their cities will be destroyed and important sources of water dried up. Details such as the grass withering, so that "nothing green is left", are meant more figuratively than literally, reflecting a land in which all signs of life will have been extinguished.

Then too, Moab's considerable wealth will be carried away (see also below), and the fugitives from Moab's fall will desperately seek refuge. The harshness of Moab's fall is shown through Isaiah's statement that these fugitives will feel as if a lion has come upon them. In the next chapter, the prophet details the reasons why the Moabites will suffer such a dire fate.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Other than the events mentioned here, what other connections were there between Moab and the Israelites? What general characteristics did Moab have (good or bad)? What might some of the reasons be for Moab receiving this prophetic condemnation? What is the meaning of the imagery about their fall?

Moab's Empty Boasts (Isaiah 16:1-14)

Moab's values and perspectives clashed sharply with God's. The nation took great pride in itself and in the things it produced, but God instead looked for justice and righteousness. The

Moabites sought to find 'happiness' in the wrong things and for the wrong reasons. God took no pleasure in punishing them, but nevertheless he disciplined them all the same.

Isaiah also describes the confusion that will accompany the fall of Moab, as the survivors cry out to be given counsel (16:1-5). Like birds thrust from their nest, the Moabites do not know what to do, and can think only of finding some kind of shelter. God's answer is different, for though he has compassion on even the idolatrous, what he seeks is much different.

While the Moabites wonder how this could have happened, and try to think of something to do, God instead seeks faithfulness, justice, and righteousness. Anyone in Moab who wants these things, and who wants to know God, will be welcomed into the remnant, and can share in the blessings that will come from the house of David. But they will first need to realize that God's priority is spiritual health, not physical strength, earthly security, or material possessions. And we too would do well to learn this same lesson from Moab's example.

Moab's pride and conceit were among the main reasons for God's discipline (16:6-14), as the numerous expressions in verse 6 emphasize. The nation's apparently secure position, its material prosperity, and its economic usefulness* made the Moabites feel as if they were special. They did not consider it likely that their nation would ever fall, and they felt as if they deserved to be particularly blessed. As we have seen already in Isaiah, this is always a dangerous delusion.

* Moab's territory was situated along the ancient King's Highway, which for centuries was the main trade route connecting the large Mesopotamian nations with nations such as Arabia and Egypt. This lucky position gained Moab considerable economic and diplomatic benefits.

Moreover, even when the worst happens, the Moabites do not lament the human suffering or spiritual decay so much as they care about material things. The loss of the delicious raisin cakes* from Kir Hareseth matters more to them than their unforgiven sin, their non-existent relationship with God, or the suffering of friends and neighbors.

* See verse 7. Some versions translate the phrase as "the men of Kir Hareseth" and others as "the raisin cakes of Kir Hareseth". The original is a play on words that seems to contrast their concern for food and material things with their lack of compassion for human suffering.

This concern for the trivial is also a lesson for us. Our culture measures everything in dollars. Our society's opinion leaders, 'experts', news media, and educators routinely discuss things in pretentious yet superficial terms. The legal problems, romantic involvements, and political views of brainless celebrities are considered 'news'. The pagan Moabites would fit right in.

Because of this, Moab's "joy and gladness are taken away", and are turned to mourning. Their 'religious' rituals gain nothing, and they do not find either the help or the answers they seek, for they are looking for the wrong things. No amount of happiness or security can last for long, unless it is based on the firm foundation that God alone can provide.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Describe the feelings the Moabites will experience when the nation falls. Are they feelings that we might experience in our relationship with God? What were the main reasons why God disciplined Moab? What should we learn from them? What did God hope to gain by disciplining Moab?

Damascus & Israel (Isaiah 17:1-14)

Isaiah has already discussed Damascus (Aram, or Syria) during the crisis of 734 BC. Because it joined with the idolatrous kingdom of northern tribes to attack Judah, Aram's punishment will be linked with that of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Indeed, the prophet now points out a number of unfortunate parallels. Neither nations nor persons can stand on their own without God's grace.

Since the prophet has previously reproved and warned Aram for its alliance against Judah and its other sins (see chapters 7-8), his oracle against Damascus is relatively brief (17:1-3). Here, Isaiah merely emphasizes the ruin that the Arameans and the city of Damascus will face*. Instead of further warnings or imagery of doom, the prophet goes on to connect Aram with their ally Israel. He makes the ironic comment that Aram's glory will be "like the glory of the Israelites", when in fact Israel's glory is just about to disappear.

* Note that Isaiah does not promise permanent destruction for Damascus, as he did with nations like Assyria, but only a period of devastation. The Damascus of today is the same city as ancient Damascus.

So Isaiah returns to Israel, reproaching them for having forgotten God (17:4-11). This is, again, why discipline will not come only upon pagan nations but upon Jacob (Israel), too. Here, though, there is again the promise of a remnant, illustrated by the image of gleanings, or scraps, taken from a harvested field. God's people have strayed from him badly, and thus most of the nation will not survive, but God only needs a remnant to ensure the future.

The prophet says that they "have not remembered the Rock", which is a spiritual danger in any era. They observed sacrifices, assemblies, and other outward activities of their faith, but their minds were focused on temporary earthly things. God's desire is for us to depend on him, to trust in him, and to act on faith. When we depend on the world to get our needs met, or we trust in this world to give meaning to our lives, we have forgotten God.

The raging of nations, as they plot and scheme for wealth, power, and glory, continues through every century of human history (17:12-14). Isaiah warns us constantly of the folly of becoming caught up in the controversies, fads, and conflicts that concern the world at any given moment. All of the nations, all of their rulers, all human wealth, all human glory – whether those we see now, or those Isaiah saw – will be driven away like tumbleweeds whenever God wills it. We cannot remind ourselves too often of the illusory and temporary nature of all earthly things.

For us, this is a key application of these chapters and of this part of Isaiah. The folly of trusting in worldly things could not be clearer, yet we all still struggle with it. If we want to understand and appreciate what we have in God, we must give up our worldly sources of hope and purpose. Neither government nor education nor rulers nor celebrities nor athletes nor anything else in this world can meet our truest and deepest needs. But God can, does, and will.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah connect Damascus and Israel in this oracle? Is there a spiritual parallel that we should note? What does it mean to forget God? How can we prevent ourselves from doing this? How do we see the 'raging of nations' today? How can Isaiah help us with our perspective on it?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2008 - ©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Ten: The Reeds & Rushes Will Wither (Isaiah 18:1-21:17)

Isaiah's series of oracles about the nations of his era concludes with pronouncements regarding the nations to Judah's south: Cush, Egypt, Edom, & Arabia. Interspersed with these is an additional reminder about Babylon's future fall. The prophet knew that even God's own people had great difficulty putting these nations and their activities into a godly perspective.

Review Of Recent Classes

After the series of prophecies given while Judah was under attack (Isaiah 7-12), the book of Isaiah then has a series of oracles (pronouncements) about other nations of the time. Isaiah first declares that the "day of the Lord" is coming for Babylon (Isaiah 13:1-14:32). Along with the oracle about Babylon, the prophet discusses Assyria and Philistia.

The next prophecy emphasizes God as "one who in judging seeks justice" (15:1-17:14). This time, the smaller nation of Moab is warned that destruction can come in a night if God so wills it. Moab's history was for centuries intertwined with Israel's, sometimes on a friendly basis and sometimes on a hostile basis. But flight and lamentation have been decreed for the Moabites.

The main reason for this warning of doom is Moab's empty boasts. Their pride and conceit are all out of proportion with their status. The nation was small but prosperous, and its concern for the trivial had pulled the hearts of the Moabites far from God. Isaiah also links Damascus (the capital of Aram, or Syria) with Israel, because of their crass military alliance. Unbelievers and God's own people alike have forgotten God. The raging of nations and peoples may seem important superficially, but the events of this world have little lasting importance in God's eyes.

Warnings To Cush & Egypt (Isaiah 18:1-19:15)

The African nations of Egypt and Cush (or Kush*) were two of the world's oldest civilizations, both with histories that began long before Isaiah's lifetime. In this era, they were largely sheltered from danger by other nations and natural obstacles. They had thus developed a false sense of security, combined with ambitions of gaining more influence in world affairs.

* Conventionally spelled Cush in most Bible versions, although Kush may be more historically accurate.

Isaiah's warning to Cush (18:1-7) came when that nation had great ambitions. Cush's strength was near its height, and (by 715 BC) it had established dominance over its neighbor Egypt. Isaiah's address to Cush begins with the evocative phrase, "Woe to the land of whirring wings". On a literal level, this refers to the large and numerous insects inhabiting the Nile region, where both Egypt and Cush were located. Though residents of these areas were thoroughly accustomed to them, these insects invariably frightened and intimidated visitors from other countries.

On a more figurative level, the whirring wings are symbolic of the frantic political and diplomatic activity in the region, as human leaders and rulers competed with one another to fulfill their earthly ambitions. The Cushites eagerly sought to play a major role in the diplomatic and military activities taking place in the sensitive areas around Judah. Most significantly, they hoped to equal Assyria in regional influence. All of this seemed vitally important to everyone at the time, but to God it was as insignificant as the loud whirring of insects' wings.

Cush was one of the nations arising from the ancient Nubian civilizations along the Nile Valley, which are among the oldest known in human history. Over time, the Egyptians came to rule over the Lower Nile (that is, the portion closest to the ocean) while the Cushites established their kingdom along the Upper Nile, to the south*. For centuries, Cush and Egypt battled for dominance in the region, with Cush holding the upper hand during Isaiah's lifetime. Although it soon lost its dominance over Egypt, Cush continued for several centuries afterward, generally known to history as Ethiopia**, the name given to it by the Greeks***.

* Roughly where the present-day nation of Sudan is located.

** Note that this should not be directly equated with the present-day nation of Ethiopia (known historically as Abyssinia), although there are some historical connections between the two.

*** The "Ethiopian eunuch" in Acts 8 is, in fact, a Cushite. The "Candace" referred to in Acts 8:27 as his ruler is more accurately referred to as Kandake. A long-standing Cushite tradition, the Kandake was a queen or empress who ruled over large portions of the Nile region.

During the era when Isaiah lived, the nations of Cush, Egypt, and Assyria had many interactions with one another, while Judah (and, before its fall, Israel) found itself caught in the middle. While Egypt frequently played a prominent role in Israelite history, this is one of the few eras in which Cush was a significant direct influence on the nation*.

* Note, though, that Moses married a Cushite (see Numbers 12:1), and Cush is also mentioned at least in passing in several other books of the Old Testament. In some contexts, Cush came to be used as a general term to refer to the African nations other than Egypt. The Queen of Sheba is also thought to have been a Cushite, and very possibly was the Kandake (see note above) of her era.

The general situation is reflected in these verses by Cush's eagerness to send envoys abroad, especially to a land "divided by rivers" (referring to Mesopotamia, the region of Assyria and also Babylon). Cush had no ideological position, just ambition, and would have welcomed equally the chance to ally with Assyria or the opportunity to compete with Assyria. God, for his part, is remaining quiet and watching the fruitless strivings and empty ambitions of earthly nations, until the time comes for him to use them for his own purposes.

The prophecy against Egypt (19:1-15) is set in this same situation, but it is much more pointed. God here is pictured as "riding on a swift cloud" as he prepares to deal with Egypt. Even when they were weak, the ancient Egyptians still tended to see themselves as a world power whose name made other nations tremble. As Isaiah's warning details, Egypt was beset by internal rivalries and external threats, yet its foolish 'wise men' helped the rest of the Egyptians delude themselves into a false sense of security. God intends to use this to discipline them.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does God warn Cush? Why is Egypt being warned? Why is Egypt warned so much more severely? How might this situation affect Judah? Are there ways in which this situation can teach us today?

They Will Acknowledge The Lord (Isaiah 19:16-20:6)

Even when disciplining unbelieving nations, God's desire is never punishment or destruction for their own sake. In all things, God seeks for us to acknowledge him as the only living God. Because he knows that any nation, any time, can hold souls who seek him from the heart, he therefore gives his attention – including his discipline – to them all, as we now see here.

This next passage is not always easy to interpret*, yet it is an encouraging vision of the ways that God works to bring to him a remnant from the nations. Isaiah describes Egyptians and Assyrians joining Israel in getting on the “highway” that leads to God (19:16-25). Predominately (though not exclusively) Messianic, this passage tells how “in that day” God will bless even those nations he once brought low, for the sake of those among the remnant who come from them.

* The obscure details in verse 18 are probably not meant to be literal. Some commentators think that Isaiah is referencing Joshua 10, where five cities (or kings) symbolized overall conquest. More likely, the number five has no significance, and Isaiah is simply saying that in the Nile region there will be a fair number of persons who come to worship the living God – not necessarily concentrated in any literal place or places.

When Egyptians and Assyrians humbly turn to God, it will of course not be as nations, but as individuals* - yet it is no less wonderful and no less miraculous for that. Here we see the remnant process taking place on a larger scale than the prophet has mentioned previously, as he makes emphatically clear that God’s plans include (and have always included) the salvation and blessing of everyone in the world who seeks him in spirit and in truth.

* Acts 2 mentions both Mesopotamians (2:9) and Egyptians (2:10) as being in the crowd at Pentecost.

Historically, Judaism would later become well-established in Egypt, and in particular it would become an important part of the education and cultural sphere in the great city of Alexandria. Christianity too would find fertile ground in Egypt, and in early Christianity the congregation at Alexandria would rise to become one of the strongest and most influential congregations*.

* Note also that the churches in northern Africa tended to be the firmest at resisting both the persecutions and the false teachings that eventually led the New Testament church into spiritual decay.

But before such things can happen, discipline is needed, as Isaiah emphasizes himself by going stripped and barefoot (20:1-6). Isaiah is a living example to Judah, reproaching it for taking a worldly approach to current events, since Judah and its rulers were now looking to Egypt and Cush as their protectors against the increasingly dangerous Assyrians. Even from an earthly perspective, this was a dubious hope, since it would be much easier for Assyria to attack Judah than for the African nations to defend it - yet it was an even bigger mistake spiritually.

God thus will make sure that the weakness of Egypt and Cush is exposed. Just after an Assyrian raid on the Philistine city of Ashdod (in 711 BC), God calls Isaiah to spend the next three years as a humiliating but striking image of the emptiness of the nations in the face of God. This is accompanied by the warning that Cush and Egypt will be of little use against Assyria.

This in turn was proven dramatically in 671 BC (probably after Isaiah’s death) when a brutal Assyrian raid of the Nile region was followed by a long procession of mostly naked prisoners taken captive to Assyria. The procession passed through Judah, so that the Judeans could “see what happened to those we relied on”. The same kind of disappointment awaits all who trust in worldly force, leaders, or wealth to solve their problems or to make them feel more secure.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what sense will Egypt and Assyria turn to God? Why will God strike them first and then heal them? What is the meaning of the image of a highway? How does it compare with the use of the same image in Isaiah 11:16?

Morning Is Coming, But Also The Night (Isaiah 21:1-17)

Once more, we see both sides of God's nature in these prophecies, as God seeks the kind of spiritual repentance and renewal that often come only after a period of discipline. Along with

Babylon, Edom and Arabia are added to the list of nations that Isaiah prophesies about. They too will endure hardships as part of the grim but vital process of calling out a spiritual remnant.

In another oracle about Babylon (21:1-10), the prophet vividly describes the tumult of Babylon's future fall. Isaiah reviews God's will for Babylon to fall, the surprise of the decisive attack, and the dramatic change of fortunes that will accompany it. Although he has already thoroughly detailed Babylon's collapse and the reasons for it, Isaiah repeats the basic message here because it is part of the overall picture he is painting.

Likewise, the oracle concerning Edom (poetically called "Dumah", a play on words*) should be seen in this light (21:11-12). Isaiah gives no specific reasons why Edom should suffer**, yet he portrays the Edomites as anxiously watching events around them, fearing that they too may be harmed in the confusion. The enigmatic answer of the Edomite watchman, in Isaiah's prophecy, acknowledges simply that they are helpless in the face of larger and more powerful forces. Edom too will have to endure the pain that the entire region is going to suffer, so that God can proceed with the all-important plan of preparing a spiritual remnant.

* Dumah means silent, foretelling how the nation of Edom will one day be silenced forever.

** On the other hand, the entire prophetic book of Obadiah is devoted to Edom's fall and the reasons for it. As close relatives of the Israelites, they should have sympathized with the troubles of their brothers, but instead they looked for ways to profit from them. Edom was displaced by the Babylonian invasions and then dwindled out as a nation, though their descendants, the Idumeans, remained for some centuries.

The next oracle also warns the Arabians* of trouble (21:13-17). They would not suffer invasion, destruction, or captivity as some of the other nations would, but they would suffer economically because of their reliance on trade with these other nations. So they too needed to get ready for tough times. Isaiah does not ask whether they 'deserve' this in human terms, since it is not relevant. As humans, they too have sinned in many ways, and as a nation they, like the others, exist only by God's grace. Spiritually, any Arabian who sincerely sought God would only benefit from the reminder of how fragile and temporary the things of this world are.

* At the time, a group of independent kingdoms, rather than a unified nation.

These last several chapters summarize for us the ways that God used Isaiah's ministry to begin laying the groundwork for his remnant. From 740 BC, when Isaiah began his prophecies, until 538 BC, when the first captives began to return to Judah, the world went through a long series of traumatic and often painful series of events. Secular historians analyze many of these events in great detail, but to God they mattered only insofar as they furthered his designs.

We too must learn to let God's perfect will sustain us. Our pre-occupation with worldly events, worldly crises, and worldly goals – no matter how important they seem to be – keeps us from knowing and loving God. God's ways often seem incomprehensible or even objectionable to the flesh. If God's ways were as pleasing to the flesh as they are to the spirit, then we would not need to have faith. But we do need genuine faith, and this is just what God seeks in our hearts.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah again mention Babylon? Why does he warn Edom and Arabia without detailing their sins? What overall lessons should we learn from Isaiah 13-21? How do they apply to the church today? How can we develop a faithful acceptance of God's will, no matter what our fleshly natures think?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2008 - ©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Eleven: The Valley Of Vision (Isaiah 22:1-24:23)

In the next several chapters (Isaiah 22-27), the prophet calls us to consider what God is doing on an even larger scale. Isaiah calls his hearers and readers to the realization that the entire earth is of a temporary, fragile nature. Indeed, it is this sobering truth that is behind God's desire to preserve a remnant of spiritual survivors, whose faith can overcome anything in this world.

Review Of Recent Classes

Isaiah 13-21 contains a series of oracles about the nations of the day. Each one is warned about its pride, for they all tended to see themselves as special and superior, regardless of their actual condition. Babylon (chapters 13 & 14), Moab (Chapters 15 & 16), Damascus (or Aram) and Ephraim (or Israel, Chapter 17), as well as the southern nations of Cush, Egypt, Edom, and Arabia (Chapters 18, 19, 20, and 21), would all face God's discipline in the near future.

Isaiah warns the nations along the Nile that God will bring upon them a day when their reeds and rushes will wither (Isaiah 18:1-21:17), implying their decline. In his warnings to Cush and Egypt, Isaiah calls them the "land of whirring wings", since the heavy insect population along the Nile symbolized the noisy, empty nature of their worldly ambitions in Isaiah's lifetime.

God's goal is not punishment for punishment's sake, but to get humans to acknowledge their Lord. Egyptians, Cushites, and Assyrians are all invited to get on the 'highway' that Isaiah describes. This image calls us to use discernment in looking at the world's misfortunes, so that we can see our need for God. Isaiah himself spends three years stripped and barefoot, to emphasize the final fate of those who trust in worldly strength. Then, to neighboring Edom and Arabia (and to Babylon as well), Isaiah warns that morning is coming, but also the night.

God is laying the groundwork for the remnant, which will be open to believers from any nation, any time. This is all that truly mattered in Isaiah's day, and it is all that truly matters in our own. In the next section of Isaiah (chapters 22-27), Isaiah guides us into the change of perspective that will come when we truly understand what God is doing on this earth.

Captured Without Using The Bow (Isaiah 22:1-25)

In this passage, the prophet gives Jerusalem a warning in some respects similar to the warnings in previous chapters, but this one goes deeper. Isaiah calls for no less than a complete adjustment of perspective, urging the people to learn the right lessons from the things they see and know. He even uses two particular individuals as living examples of his message.

The prophet warns the complacent residents of Jerusalem that their self-centered revelry can change to terror before they realize what is happening (22:1-14). They have come to take God for granted as an all-purpose protector, but God can pull the city down in a moment if he wills it; he can arrange for them to be captured and humbled even without weapons, should he so wish.

Jerusalem was on a hill, so Isaiah's phrase, 'Valley Of Vision' contradicts the physical facts, just as Jerusalem has taken on an identity opposite of what God intended. It is the valley of vision, because God wishes them to reverse their perspective from the physical and seen to the spiritual and unseen. Even the Israelites have fallen into the same habit of focusing on the temporary and

fleshly that afflicts the 'unbelieving' nations. The only cure is for them once again to start seeing clearly. And, given the condition of their hearts, this will only come about through discipline.

Isaiah uses the city's water reservoir to illustrate this. King Hezekiah's aqueduct* had for the first time established an underground connection between the city's water source and the city itself**, so that Jerusalem no longer had worry about getting cut off from its water supply. No problem in itself, of course, but the prophet describes how this feeling of security had become a self-satisfied feeling, rather than one of gratitude.

* See 2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chronicles 32:2-4. The aqueduct was an impressive engineering feat for the time.

** Jerusalem's water source was the Gihon spring, east of the city and outside its walls. Earlier, an overhead conduit connected the city with the spring, so that the residents did not have to leave the safety of the city walls to get water. But in times of siege, an enemy might be able to cut off the city's water by damaging the exposed conduit. Hezekiah's project eliminated this danger.

Jerusalem's attitude of "Let us eat and drink . . . ", ignoring or denying their serious spiritual needs, incurs God's reproach. Their pride in being 'Gods people', their pride in their 'strong' city, and their pride in outward appearance were no different, spiritually, than the pride for which Moab, Babylon, and Egypt would also be disciplined. The prophet's dire warning that their sin would never be atoned for* emphasizes how strongly God opposes pride.

* In saying this, it is implicit that God realizes the impossibility of their repentance. Otherwise they would still have a chance to receive atonement.

To illustrate this on an individual level, Isaiah compares two palace stewards (22:15-25). The steward at the time, Shebna*, is reprovved, for his presumption and pride have made him unworthy. He will thus be hurled away, demoted from his position and humbled publicly. We know little else about Shebna, but we do know that God often allows prideful rulers and officials to remain in place for many years. So Shebna must have been particularly hardened in his pride.

* Shebna is mentioned several times in 2 Kings 18-19, and he appears again in Isaiah 36-37. In these passages, he has been demoted to secretary rather than palace administrator, in keeping with the prophecy.

In contrast with this bad example is Eliakim*, who will replace him. Isaiah refers to him as a peg driven into a firm place, the kind of servant who can be counted on to put his responsibilities first, not himself. Yet also Isaiah foresees the day when this 'peg' will be sheared off, because Eliakim can only protect his own faithfulness in an unfaithful society. He cannot carry anyone by his coattails, and those who think that their association with him can save them are mistaken.

* For more on Eliakim, see 2 Kings 18-19 and Isaiah 36-37 (same passages as above), in which Isaiah's prediction has come true, and Eliakim is now the palace administrator.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does the 'Valley Of Vision' apply to us today? Why wasn't Jerusalem treated any differently than unbelieving cities and nations? What should we learn from this? How should we apply the contrast between the two stewards?

The Marketplace Of The Nations (Isaiah 23:1-18)

The wealthy, prominent city of Tyre well merited Isaiah's description of it as "the marketplace of the nations". Amongst all the places that Isaiah's oracles mention, Tyre held a rather unique position. While all of the other cities and nations competed bitterly with one another, they all wanted Tyre to remain secure, successful, and prosperous, for this would benefit everyone.

Because Tyre was such an important part of the world's economy, the grief and wailing over its fall (23:1-14) will be considerable. The prophet depicts the anguish as carrying all the way from Tarshish*, on one end of the Mediterranean Sea, to Egypt, on the other, and presumably many places in between. Yet the wailing and grief will be selfish, not compassionate. Those who grieve for Tyre do not care about the dead individuals, but for their own inconvenience and loss.

* Tarshish is familiar to Bible readers for being the place that Jonah was trying to reach instead of going to Nineveh. Known to ancient history as Tartessus, this was a mining region on the eastern coast of Spain. It was rich in metal deposits, especially silver and tin (quite valuable at the time). Because Tartessus was such a long distance from most of the major nations, its prosperity depended on shipping, Tyre's specialty.

Tyre was the main city of the influential Phoenician civilization. Located on the coast about 100 miles north of Jerusalem*, for centuries it was the center of maritime trade for a large part of the world. It was home to a large harbor and extensive warehouses, and conducted all aspects of international trade. Its geographical situation was secure, for Tyre was in essence two different cities. A strip of settlements along the mainland coast provided a constant supply of timber and fresh water to the main city, which was located on a fortified island. The main city was so secure that it once withstood a 13-year siege at the hands of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar.

* Today, Tyre is in the southern part of the nation of Lebanon, near Lebanon's border with Israel.

Tyre was devoted to wealth and prosperity, but Isaiah makes clear that it was Tyre's pride and complacency (again) that constituted its worst sins. Its residents showed no concern for anything but their own well-being and enjoyment. Like so many other nations Isaiah has mentioned, they took pride in their wealth and felt that they deserved it. But "the Lord Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth" (verse 9).

Tyre began to decline not long after Isaiah's day, gradually losing its independence, and finally being conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BC*. It maintained some of its commercial influence for a while, but it eventually dwindled into obscurity. Like so many other powerful leaders, nations, and cities, its relatively brief period of glory turned out to be pretty meaningless.

* Alexander's famous victory over Tyre was achieved with the use of a causeway that his army built to connect the mainland with the island.

Isaiah also foresaw a figurative 'comeback' for Tyre (23:15-18). Notice that this is not a welcome or deserved comeback, but instead is described as the return of a prostitute. While Tyre's wealth alone was not the main reason why God disciplined it, neither was Tyre's role as the marketplace of the nations pleasing to God.

Historically, Tyre never came close to regaining its former wealth or prominence. Isaiah is not proclaiming a return to fame of the physical city of Tyre, but rather a thematic truth about the human world. With Tyre brought low, the nations simply found other cities and other nations to take its place in finance and commerce. The leading economic pillars of the world come and go, but human nature is such that there will always be these centers of greed and materialism.

When the prophet says that the wealth of the 'new' Tyre will be set apart for the Lord, rather than being hoarded by the materialistic, this also is not a literal prophecy but a spiritual truth. Those with material wealth in this world do not really own it at all, and in their hearts they know that they cannot enjoy it forever. This is one reason why the wealthy and powerful of the world are so jealous of their possessions and their authority, and why they selfishly and unthinkingly strive for more, even when they already have more than they need or deserve.

It is only the truly faithful who can gratefully enjoy their temporary possessions on this earth, without craving more and without envying others. The faithful believer with a few humble possessions is far richer than an unbeliever with storehouses full of worldly treasures.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What parallels to Tyre might there be today? What current lessons should we learn from Isaiah's prophecy about Tyre? Does it tell us anything about the way God views worldly prosperity and wealth?

The Moon Abashed & The Sun Ashamed (Isaiah 24:1-23)

Isaiah's series of dire warnings now reaches a climax, as he indicates that God's discipline is not limited to the finite series of oracles that Isaiah has given. Rather, the entire world is sinful, fragile, and ultimately destined for destruction. This realization puts into proper perspective not only everything Isaiah has said, but a good deal more of God's Word as well.

It is a sobering but undeniable truth that one day the entire earth will be laid waste (24:1-13)*. We constantly see portions of the earth devastated by wars, natural disasters, accidents, and the like, yet very few humans are discerning enough to learn the real lessons that this holds. Delusional 'leaders' and opinion makers think that their wisdom and self-righteousness can someday create a safe, perfect world. But in truth, no one, nowhere, no time, is ever safe.

* Chapters 24-27 are sometimes called "Isaiah's apocalypse" by commentators.

Neither famous nor obscure, neither poor nor rich, are exempted from God's judgment, just as no one is exempted from physical death. This earth, for all the good things in it, was never meant to be permanent, and the whole earth has long been defiled and cursed by human sin. Even those most intelligent in worldly terms are too blind to see the impermanent, fragile nature of the earth as it really is. They settle for short-term pleasures and gaiety, which disappear in a moment. God wants us to have joy that lasts, not earthly fun or even 'happiness', which do not last.

Isaiah wants us to see God's overwhelming glory (24:14-23). The joy of the faithful cannot be complete until this world passes away, and eternal reality is revealed and made known. There is, of course, a cost to this, not least in the terror that the faithless will feel when all is revealed. In truth, though, the faithless live in terror even on this earth, always worried about not getting their way, and knowing that death could at any moment take away all that they live for.

So someday the floodgates will be opened (verse 18). All we now see and touch is impermanent, existing for a while by God's grace. Even the moon and the sun will be overshadowed when God's glorious light is finally revealed. The upheavals that Isaiah predicts for the nations of his time, as well as the traumas and tragedies of our own era, merely foreshadow the world's ultimate fate. The faithless groan at the thought of all they desire disappearing at a stroke, but the faithful rejoice in knowing with certainty that something far better than this world awaits us.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does the earth being laid waste connect with the remnant and other themes Isaiah has taught so far? Why does he go into such lavish detail about the earth being broken up and destroyed? How should we respond?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2008 - ©2008 by Mark Garner

Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

A REMNANT WILL RETURN: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-27

Notes For Week Twelve: A Shelter From The Storm (Isaiah 25:1-27:13)

In this part of Isaiah (chapters 22-27), the prophet calls us to realize that the entire earth is of a temporary, fragile nature. Amongst many other implications, this emphasizes the importance of the spiritual remnant that God is preparing. Although Isaiah has just proclaimed some of his grimmest prophecies, he now adds a message that combines exhortation with lasting hope.

Review Of Recent Classes

Isaiah 13-21 contains oracles about some of the nations of Isaiah's era. Babylon, Moab, Damascus (Aram), Ephraim (symbolic of the northern tribes), Cush, Egypt, Edom, and Arabia are all warned that there are hard times ahead, as God brings the discipline that is necessary in order to build a highway for the remnant of his people from all over the earth. Isaiah 22-27* then describes the change of perspective that can help us to understand what God is doing.

* Chapters 24-27 are sometimes called "Isaiah's apocalypse". Recall that the term 'apocalypse' most correctly means a revealing, an uncovering of the truth.

Isaiah describes God's people as being in 'the Valley of Vision' (Isaiah 22:1-24:23), where they are called to see things more clearly. The complacent residents of Jerusalem are warned that, if God wills it, they can be captured suddenly or face unexpected terror in Jerusalem. The prophet uses two palace stewards, one prideful and the other faithful, as a living illustration.

Isaiah then prophesies against Tyre, the "marketplace of the nations". Anguish over Tyre's future collapse will be felt in all directions, because of its economic importance. But Tyre is not special to God, and its pride has doomed it to harsh discipline. Yet Isaiah's warning is not only for the specific nations and cities that he has preached against, but for the whole world.

This entire world is temporary, and even the sun and moon themselves are put to shame by God's transcendent majesty and might. One day the entire earth will be laid waste, and no one will be exempt. Unbelievers will be terrified and helpless, but the faithful will rejoice forever more in finally having the chance to see God's overwhelming glory in all its truth.

The Hand Of The Lord (Isaiah 25:1-12)

God's discipline can be harsh and painful, even for believers, yet it is an essential part of calling out God's remnant. Those who know and love God cannot be fulfilled by worldly things, yet they are still human, and are tempted by them. God's sternness in dealing with the unfaithful is part of his compassion on the faithful, who will receive the best and most lasting of his blessings.

Isaiah reminds us that his prophecies present things planned long before his own time (25:1-5). God's priorities have never changed, and he has known our needs since before we were created. God can foresee the need for disciplining the nations without knowing what a particular individual will do. Whatever Isaiah prophesies about a nation, the individuals of that nation can still choose for themselves whether to follow God or to follow idols.

Humbling the strong and proud has always been part of the way that God deals with humanity. Isaiah says that the fortified town will become a ruin, and that the stronghold will never be rebuilt, to illustrate how God can humble us by taking away the worldly things that give us a false sense of security and meaning. God eventually humbles all of the proud, without playing favorites, giving hope to the faithful no matter who or where they are. Even some citizens of ruthless nations will honor God (verse 3) as a result.

God also provides an ever-present refuge for the poor and weak. Once again, though, God does not play favorites; the poor are not automatically safe solely for that reason. But a poor, weak, or outcast person can always be assured that God is the one place where all are loved and welcome. God is also the one judge who judges always on the truth alone. God is consistent in all things: in his values, in his priorities, in his nature, in his purity, in his truthfulness. His eternal consistency is both encouraging and convicting.

Isaiah returns to one of his recurring images, promising that "on this mountain"* the Lord will bless and perfect his people (25:6-12). The rich feast he provides connects back to Isaiah 23:18, where he promised that the wealth of the 'Tyres' of the world would be reserved for the faithful. This, too, is not a promise of literal feasting, but of the surpassing joys that come with knowing God forever. He will also do away with all tears, both those caused by sadness and those caused by sin. These shrouds of darkness can only be removed permanently for the humble and faithful.

* Compare this passage, in particular, with Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:9, and 18:3. See also the questions below.

Isaiah calls us to sing, "this is our God", for in him we have found a true and lasting hope. Those whose faith is conditional and temporary, and those whose faith is in human righteousness or human wisdom, will inevitably be let down. The prophet once again uses graphic imagery to describe the ultimate faith of the proud. The rising and falling of souls, the same phenomenon that Simeon associates with Jesus in Luke 2:34-35, will take place contrary to all earthly human standards. Humans admire, honor, and imitate the proud, the ambitious, and the self-confident. Such persons might as well enjoy their acclaim now, for their eternal fate will be a grim one.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What New Testament passages describe how God feels towards the proud (and the weak)? How do they compare with Isaiah's emphasis? How else does Isaiah use mountains? Do they always mean the same thing? How does the mountain image apply for us? What kind of 'feast' does Isaiah promise here?

Your Name Alone Do We Honor (Isaiah 26:1-21)

This song of praise reminds us of the transcendent blessings that the faithful receive from God, while also cautioning us that the remnant must worship God alone. It has ever been God's nature to bring down the high and mighty, and to lift up the humble and lowly. Those who forget this do so at their own peril. Those who remember it are able to see God as he truly is.

The prophet describes here what we often call 'walking with God' (26:1-11), that is, the characteristics of a day-to-day relationship with God. He illustrates this first with the image of a city, turning a simple example a direct challenge of the ways that many of his hearers sought security and confidence. Isaiah's strong and righteous 'city' is, in fact, not a physical city at all.

Judah was used to thinking of safety and security being represented by the physical city of Jerusalem*, but Isaiah calls them to build a truly strong city based on the spiritual strength that

comes with salvation. This lesson was badly needed by Isaiah's audience, and today's believers likewise would do well to stop seeking worldly forms of security and to realize how much better it is to have an eternal security that puts the troubles of this world into their proper perspective.

* From David's time to Isaiah's, Jerusalem had successfully withstood all foreign attempts to capture it.

When the prophet assures the faithful that they will experience perfect peace and level paths, this too is a spiritual promise, and it too is better than a promise of mere worldly success and ease. There is no shortage of examples, both in history and at the present time, of humans whose earthly lives contain things that everyone else envies, and yet who always feel a need for more.

God's grace, God's righteousness, and God's zeal are the kinds of blessings that cure the soul and the spirit of their longings and their constant sufferings. In his extraordinary patience, God grants us many blessings that we do not really need. But he earnestly hopes that we shall someday realize that his greatest and most defining qualities do not serve the needs of our flesh at all, but the deeper needs of our souls. The activities and struggles of the flesh only have lasting meaning insofar as they help us (and others) to see beyond this temporary world.

Isaiah frequently reminds us that the Lord, or his day, is coming (26:12-21). We have seen, from the ways in which Isaiah uses these phrases, that they can mean a number of things* in earthly terms. But in one sense or another these will always mean one thing: God will make his presence felt in our affairs, in a way that the faithful cannot help but notice. Here, though, Isaiah speaks in a more general and long-term sense, more similar to the ways in which 'the Lord's coming' might be used by some believers today.

* Most previous examples in Isaiah have foretold acts of divine discipline. In the notes to week two of this class series, there is a list of selected examples of these phrases in Isaiah, which you can use, if desired, as a basis for further study.

This chapter's exhortations, then, do not apply to a specific situation so much as they help strengthen our faith and clarify our spiritual perspective. Then, whenever our Lord chooses to make his presence clear, our response will be one of awe and joy, not guilt and fear. As Isaiah so aptly reminds us, in our earthly lives there are many persons who presume to rule over us or to have authority over us, yet only God should receive our honor, our faith, and our reverence.

Right after these observations, the prophet reminds us of the 'departed spirits', not to threaten us, but to clear our minds of the world's lies. He depicts the persons of the earth in their restless strivings, comparing their efforts to the pains of childbirth, but with a crucial difference. For the strivings of the worldly are empty; "we gave birth to wind". No amount of education, labor, or sacrifice can give any genuine, lasting meaning to the affairs of this earth. They matter to God only insofar as they help the discerning to see God or to see their need for God. To those who do see through the distractions of the world, God offers a truly new birth.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kind of 'strong city' is Isaiah describing? Would this image apply differently for his original hearers? How ought we honor God alone, and not the earthly 'lords' who claim to rule us? Why does Isaiah compare our earthly labors with childbirth? Why does it give birth to 'wind'?

Purification & Redemption (Isaiah 27:1-13)

In a series of poetic images, Isaiah now recapitulates in brief God's overall desire. The world - all the nations, all the peoples - will be shaken, disciplined, and humbled. Those who allow God to purify them will become part of God's remnant. His eyes always see everything, everywhere, and he will gather up the souls in his remnant irrespective of their time, place, or earthly status.

The spiritual struggle that the prophet describes is ongoing, and shall continue as long as this earth exists (27:1-11). While in the flesh, we are only dimly aware of it, and even our small level of interest often leads us only into empty speculations. But it is still real.

This is why Isaiah speaks of God punishing 'Leviathan', the mythical great beast of the sea*. Once again, the image is a figurative one, which is used a number of times in the Old Testament**. In one sense, Leviathan is an encapsulation of the ancient fears of the sea and its strange creatures. Prophetically, it is used as an image of uncontrollable force - uncontrollable, that is, to humans. It is used here, as the sea itself is used elsewhere, to symbolize the frightening, but ultimately pointless, strivings of worldly nations and rulers***.

* Most often pictured as a giant sea serpent. Contrary to the fanciful efforts of some commentators, Leviathan does not refer to any real animal. Neither crocodiles nor prehistoric reptiles would match the literal details in Scripture (see below).

** See Job 3:8, 41:1; Psalms 74:14, 104:26. (How is the image used in these passages?)

*** See, for example, Daniel 7 and Revelation 13.

Isaiah then returns to a previous image, in speaking of the Lord's vineyard - which (see Isaiah 5) despite God's lavish care, has not been fruitful. Now, God laments that it would not be nearly so bad if the problem was only briars and thorns, instead of a far sadder spiritual illness. Because of this, it is only through discipline and atonement that God can proceed, as Isaiah has so often said.

But to climax this portion of his book, Isaiah describes the great gathering that will make everything else worthwhile (27:12-13). God was even then threshing the human grain fields to seek out those who longed for his truth. Even in Isaiah's time, God was looking to draw a remnant from out of all the nations of the world (that is, not only from Israel).

God rejoices in Assyrians, Egyptians, and those of all nations joining the remnant of Israel itself - along with those of us who remain faithful to the truth - on the holy mountain. This is the fulfillment of what Isaiah has been preaching, and it truly makes trivial all of the world's noise, lies, and pretensions. We the faithful, the church, can be part of this by God's grace. We do not need to coerce or manipulate one another, nor need we meet any kind of numerical or result-oriented 'standard'. We need only to stop taking ourselves so seriously, stop listening to the lies of the worldly, and start building more of an appreciation for God's grace, Word, and will.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is the point of God's conquest of 'Leviathan'? What does the prophet want us to learn from his re-use of the vineyard image? What kind of gathering is he describing in verses 12-13? How does this sum up what Isaiah has said in the rest of the book so far?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2008 - 2008 by Mark Garner
Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

