

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week One: Grain Must Be Ground (Isaiah 28:1-29:12)

Now that the prophet has carefully detailed God's wish to call forth a remnant of believers out of an unbelieving world, he begins to focus more closely on the foundation of faith that God wishes his remnant to have. Since the world will not stop in its efforts to pull us back into its futility, Isaiah's warnings and exhortations are just as vital to today's believers as they were originally.

Review Of Isaiah 1-27

Isaiah 1-5 provides an exposition of the book's main themes, centering on the warning to return to God, and on the promise of grace and blessing for those who do. Then (Isaiah 6), Isaiah describes his call to prophetic ministry. Seeing the Lord was a humbling experience, and it gave him a perspective that transcended the temporary concerns and trivial affairs of this world.

With Judah under attack from the northern tribes of Israel in alliance with Aram, God sends Isaiah to teach both the king and the people to trust in God, not in worldly force (Isaiah 7-12). In so doing, Isaiah also proclaims some significant prophecies about the Messiah. The Immanuel theme ('God with us') ties together the (then) present and the future.

The emphasis then turns outward (Isaiah 13-21), as the prophet proclaims a series of oracles about the nations of his era. These messages show God's desire to crush human pride in all its forms, and his desire to build a remnant of persons from every time and place who seek the truth and who wish to know their God.

The prophet exhorts believers to adopt a complete change of perspective (Isaiah 22-27), and to see both worldly things and spiritual things in their true light. The last four chapters of this section are often called "Isaiah's Apocalypse" because of the drastic change of viewpoint they present. Isaiah describes Jerusalem as 'the Valley of Vision', for God's people have become the opposite of what they were intended to be, and now need to see things more clearly. The entire earth is perishable and temporary; it will suffer much discipline and will someday cease even to exist. But God will always provide a shelter from the storm, spiritual safety, for his remnant.

An overriding lesson in this part of Isaiah is the awareness of what really matters to God. From his divine and eternal perspective, his thoughts about earthly events are much different than ours are. If we develop the right point of view, then we can see how everything in this life actually points us to our need for God and for the lasting blessings that only he can give us.

A Wreath For The Remnant (Isaiah 28:1-15)

While worldly persons frantically seek the paltry, perishable rewards ('wreaths') that this earth offers, God wishes to give truly valuable blessings to his remnant. Those who wish to obtain this world's rewards willingly engage in bizarre, twisted rites that rot their souls, only to 'gain' things of little lasting value. How sad, then, for Christians needlessly to follow the same path.

Isaiah thus draws a graphic contrast between the earthly rewards that the world offers and the spiritual promises that God offers, or, as he depicts them symbolically, between wreaths that fade

and wreaths* that last (28:1-6). The prophet uses drunkenness to typify the kind of pointless, self-centered behavior that typifies worldly activity of all kinds. Just as a drunkard takes 'pride' in the infantile applause that his peers award him, so also all worldly awards and distinctions are in reality nothing but fading flowers. If understood as such, then such rewards can be accepted with humility and gratitude. But even the faithful can easily be tempted to over-value them.

* Wreaths were already familiar as a symbol of victory and achievement. The ancient Olympic games (which began in 776 BC, a generation or so before Isaiah began to prophesy) used olive wreaths, while the ancient Pythian Games used wreaths of laurel or other evergreens.

The Lord, though, is a truly glorious crown to believers. Long before Isaiah's time, God emphasized that he, and a relationship with him, are the greatest rewards he has to offer ("Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward", Genesis 15:1). It is an occasional stumbling point for Christians that God never details exactly what heaven will be like; he only promises eternal life. This is because, as Abraham was told and as Isaiah teaches, it is God himself that is our ultimate reward. If we have true faith in him, then we realize that this is a sufficient guarantee of anything else we genuinely need.

Isaiah now describes in more detail the degradation and folly of worldly living (28:7-15), touching on several aspects of its futility. Most obvious is the filthiness of sin, and yet even Christians often fail to see sin for what it is. The world relentlessly exalts sin as something fun or sophisticated, or even as something that makes a 'statement'. The world even pretends that some sins, such as pride and selfish ambition, are actually virtues. But the reality is, as Isaiah describes, that all sin is shabby, stupid, pathetic, and ultimately self-destructive.

The next few verses make a different point entirely. The "do and do, rule on rule"* approach to God that Isaiah mocks here is, unfortunately, still common in our own time. It is easy to rely on pat answers to tough questions about God, and it is easy to draw up a list of thoroughly-defined do's and don'ts in areas where God wants us to use spiritual judgment instead of rules. But the apparent convenience is far outweighed by the superficial understanding that it produces.

* The text in the Hebrew is difficult to translate confidently, and this English phrase is the best attempt of the translators to put what the prophet is saying into English. In any case, he is critiquing the ritualistic, law-oriented approach to God as being inherently mindless and soulless.

These and other forms of worldly living are all what Isaiah calls a "covenant with death". Whether or not they have a superficial appearance of religion, they are not a covenant with God, but with the mortal and temporary flesh - hence Isaiah's label for them.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kinds of 'wreaths' might we pursue today? Which are worth having, in God's eyes? Which ones have apparent appeal but are actually worthless? What can we do to see sin more for what it truly is? In what ways ought we to be careful of the 'rule on rule' approach to God?

A Precious Cornerstone (Isaiah 28:16-29)

In contrast with the pointless aims and flawed foundations of the worldly, God offers us a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation, from which to build and live the rest of our lives. But as grain must be ground before it is useful, so also our hearts must be ready for God to reign in them. This can be difficult, even frightening, for it takes complete humility and trust before God.

The stone laid in Zion is a symbol familiar to us from its New Testament usages (28:16-22). Besides the Messianic implications, it reminds us of the steadfast, permanent nature of God himself. Unlike the flimsy things on which the world relies, God is always trustworthy and sure. Moreover, as the prophet implies, God is a time-tested stone. New Testament references like Romans 9:33, 10:11, 1 Peter 2:6 apply these qualities to Jesus as well.

No matter what sins and worldly follies we have indulged in, God is able and willing to annul what the prophet has called the 'covenant with death', that is, our worship of worldly things in return for the cheap 'wreaths' they provide us. Isaiah describes this as the Lord's 'strange work', and an 'alien task' (verse 21). The prophet knows what God himself has never denied: God's ways are completely alien and strange to the fleshly mind. If we wish to understand God's true will, then we must, like Isaiah, learn to see things from the divine perspective, not the earthly.

Returning to a more straightforward analogy, Isaiah reminds us that there are proper times for spiritual plowing, sowing, and harvesting (28:23-29). The farmer plows (prepares the soil) only as long as necessary. Unless the preparatory stage ends, nothing ever grows. So too the farmer plants the seed in its time and in the right places. There is also a time for spiritual plowing or preparation, and a time for spiritual planting or nurturing. But these are not ends in themselves.

During the next stages of farming, the crop is suddenly treated more harshly, because the good crop must be separated from the useless portions of the plant. But farmers (*i.e.* in Isaiah's day) would use only sticks and rods to do threshing; they do not use sledges, cartwheels, or other large implements that would crush and destroy both good grain and useless chaff.

Finally, the grain must be prepared for actual use. Grain must be ground, spiritually as well as physically. God's good grain, the remnant, must be ground by the hardships and constraints of the world, so that we learn to look beyond the world and appreciate what God truly wants for us.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does the image of a cornerstone signify? What would it have meant to Isaiah's original audience? What should it mean to us? Why is God's work 'strange' and 'alien'? How should this affect the way we seek his will? What should we learn from Isaiah's analogy of plowing, planting, and harvesting?

Nothing But Words (Isaiah 29:1-12)

One of the root problems that Isaiah faces in his ministry is one that believers struggle with in every era: the difficulty of allowing God's teachings and God's will to become reality in our minds. God gladly does everything that he can to help us to realize and understand spiritual truths, but our own fleshly resistance can make this much more difficult than it needs to be.

Isaiah's depiction of the siege of 'Ariel' makes use of a thought-provoking image (29:1-8). Ariel is used here as a symbolic name for Jerusalem, because the word itself refers to the altar hearth*, the location on the altar where fire consumes an offering. It is thus the symbolic place of direct contact between God's presence and the physical world. Being 'Ariel' carries both deep significance and deep responsibility.

* In the original Hebrew, the word is used several times in Ezekiel with its literal meaning of altar hearth.

Closeness with God is a blessed thing to be earnestly desired, but contact between the divine and the unclean can have drastic consequences. If Jerusalem wishes to have a positive relationship with God, then it must heed the prophet's urgent warnings. Since Judah will not (historically) do so, the people will find themselves besieged, not merely by foreign armies, but by the God who loves them and who needs to purify them through discipline.

Yet despite the harsh discipline that lies ahead - discipline that God regretfully imposes because of their complacency and hardness of heart - it will end abruptly. Thus Isaiah describes the siege of Ariel suddenly being broken; the foreign armies lose their status as a divine tool and become woefully weak. The nations that God allowed to attack the Israelites invariably received their own punishment later. Being useful to God did not excuse their sinful violence and pride.

With this in mind, the prophet turns to a denunciation of spiritual blindness and spiritual illiteracy (29:9-12). The former refers to those who simply ignore God's words and truths, while the latter describes those who familiarize themselves with factual things about God, but who then fail to understand what they truly mean.

Isaiah first declares that those who should have been eyes and heads to the community - that is, the prophets and seers, who should have been helping the rest to see and follow God - have been among the worst examples of spiritual blindness. In our own time as well, it is far more common for human religious leaders to pursue worldly goals than it is to find those who proclaim God's full eternal truth, without apology or rationalizations.

Yet this never excuses anyone else from failing to pursue a genuine knowledge of God. Isaiah satirizes the common excuses for this, which are much the same as the common excuses of our own time. In his depiction, one person lets a seal stop him from reading the elusive words of the scroll, while another claims not to be able to read. The former is illustrative of someone who simply will not take the time to understand God's teachings, while the latter is representative of someone who stares without understanding at the words God has written.

The implied exhortation to hear, to understand, and to accept God's truth is one that all believers should consider carefully. The world's perspectives constantly creep into our minds, causing us to read Scripture with earthly perspectives and expectations, so that they can become nothing but words to us.

Throughout Isaiah, we see an emphasis on a genuine understanding of God that will allow us to serve him without the need for fleshly tactics such as guilt and pride. If Isaiah's brief view of God on the throne led to a lifetime of proclaiming the truth, then we also have much to gain from a sincere effort to understand what spiritual truth is all about.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does the Ariel symbol apply to us? How would the siege and relief of Ariel apply? What causes spiritual blindness and illiteracy? How can we help one another to develop a more godly understanding of God's will, teachings, and nature?

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

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Two: The Wisdom Of The Wise Will Perish (Isaiah 29:13-31:9)

Since God alone can provide a reliable foundation for our lives and souls, Isaiah wants to help us to allow God to become such a cornerstone. One of the first steps is to recognize all earthly foundations as being unreliable. In this passage, for example, the prophet will discuss the inadequacy of things such as human knowledge, outward worship, and earthly force.

Review

In Isaiah 1-27, the prophet repeatedly reminds us of God's will for a remnant to return. This will be illustrated later, in a limited sense, when Judah returns from its exile to Babylon. It is fulfilled more completely in the calling out of the remnant from all the nations of the world. Human pride is an enormous obstacle to this, because it blinds us to God and to his will. But there is always a highway made ready through Jesus, for all who wish to know their Creator.

With the idea of the remnant in mind, the book now begins to shift its emphasis, urging us to make God and God alone "the sure foundation for your times". Isaiah will use events and images to impress upon us that God alone can provide us with a foundation that will last, and that will prove trustworthy throughout all of life's developments. The faithful prophet will also explain some ideas that will help us to begin making this change of perspective.

As Isaiah begins to shift emphasis, he reminds us that "grain must be ground" (Isaiah 28:1-29:12). God offers himself as a wreath, a symbol of victory, to the remnant. Yet we are constantly faced with the need to choose between worldly 'wreaths' that fade and the godly 'wreath' that lasts. God is a precious cornerstone, and the one sure foundation for our lives. So too, the Messiah, laid also in Zion, provides the means to come to God.

The prophet uses the analogy of plowing, sowing, and harvesting to describe how God works with our souls to nurture our faith and to draw us out of the world and into his remnant. As each stage of the farming process has its time and place, so also all of the things that happen in this world are important to God only insofar as they guide us to the awareness of him and the awareness of our need for him. As the grain is threshed only as vigorously as is necessary, so also he will allow us to suffer and to be tempted, but never more so than we can bear.

Even to believers, God's teachings can remain mere words. Isaiah depicts a symbolic siege of Jerusalem, calling it Ariel, the altar hearth where God's presence consumes offerings. We too are an altar hearth, where God's light and presence encounter the common and unclean things of this world. We must guard carefully against spiritual blindness and illiteracy. We should eliminate excuses, and apply ourselves to hearing, understanding, and accepting God's truth.

The Humble Will Rejoice In The Lord (Isaiah 29:13-30:7)

Before we can appreciate the lasting blessing, hope, and security that God offers, we must first realize that the world offers only false hope, false security, and temporary blessing. The prideful put their confidence in everything from intelligence to rules to force, but these are never worthy of a believer's trust. The humble rejoice not in themselves or in worldly things, but in God.

In his time, Isaiah encountered a problem that is chronic in every era: those who 'worship' God with their mouths but not with their hearts* (29:13-16). Such self-deception is simply false worship, because genuine worship does not consist of actions that we label worship, but rather of acts and words that show what we truly believe to be important and valuable.

* Jesus quoted verse 13 (in Matthew 15:8-9 and Mark 7:6-7) regarding the Pharisees. Yet it is important to note that Phariseeism is only one example of the problem Isaiah describes, and by no means the only one.

The prophet also brusquely dismisses the kind of false wisdom that the world values, reminding us of its limitations and its flimsiness in the face of spiritual reality. Earthly intelligence, in itself, is neither a spiritual advantage nor a spiritual disadvantage. If we use our minds to see God, to show him to others, or to understand our need for him, then this is truly wise. But if our education or our knowledge leads us to feel superior, or to feel that we don't need God as much as someone less intelligent might need him, then this is exactly what Isaiah criticizes.

One of the characteristics of God is that he loves to reverse the fortunes of this world, so that the deaf will hear and the blind will see (29:17-24). Again, it is not a virtue in itself to be deaf or blind, any more than it is to be poor, but neither is it a sign of inferiority or of personal fault. God offers help for the humble, in whatever circumstances they may be. There is never any need to be ashamed before God, no matter who we are in the world's eyes, and no matter what we have or have not done. To God, no human being is ever superior or inferior to any other.

The negative side of this is illustrated by the kind of ungodly alliance that believers too often seek (30:1-7). In Isaiah's time, the people and leaders of Judah were afraid of being attacked, and many of them sought to ally with Egypt, hoping this would provide 'shade' from the 'heat' of Assyria (in the prophet's imagery). This dependence on the useless worldly power of Egypt* was driven by a desire to have a fleshly sense of false security, not by faith. And thus it would bring disgrace - and doubly so. Egypt would soon prove worse than useless as a military ally, and this fruitless fleshly alliance also brought spiritual harm and disgrace to Judah.

* Isaiah is also using Egypt in a broader and more symbolic sense. Ever since the Exodus, God often reminded his people of the Israelites' foolish desire to return to Egypt during times that they endured hardship. See also the notes below on Isaiah 31:1-9.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what ways might we worship God only with our mouths? What does it mean to worship from the heart? What forms of 'worship' is Isaiah discussing? Why will God deliberately frustrate and oppose earthly knowledge and intelligence? What are the lessons in this for us? What might 'Egypt' be to us?

The Lord Longs To Be Gracious (Isaiah 30:8-26)

Isaiah vividly describes the frustration of God towards those who insist on taking the easy, self-serving, temporarily pleasant paths that this world offers them. God's blessings are so much greater and so much more valuable, but he can give them only to those who want them. Because God's greatest gifts to us always come by grace, we can obtain them only through humility.

The people of Isaiah's time were unusually blessed in having a living prophet among them, yet God's Word was still of no use to most of them, because they were simply unwilling to listen (30:8-17). It is spiritually horrifying to see them reject Isaiah's teachings with the request that he "tell us pleasant things". Worst of all, they are openly displeased at being reminded of God's presence. Whenever God's presence is real to us, we shall always find it convicting. But those whose hearts are humble would always prefer this to the alternative of not having God near.

Isaiah compares their sin with a crumbling wall, a massive pile that looks impressive at first, only to prove in reality to be a useless, dangerous burden. Instead of seeking meaning from worldly accomplishments, instead of seeking security from earthly pleasures and possessions, they should seek true salvation in godly repentance and spiritual rest (verse 15). It is not physical rest that he recommends, but a spiritual rest for the soul*. When we turn from worldly ambitions and allow God's will to guide us, this relieves our souls of a great unhealthy burden.

* Compare this passage with, for example, Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews 4:9-10.

Moreover, all the while God is just waiting for our cry (30:18-26). For all that his wrath is stored up against the ungodly who do not repent, his compassion on those who do humble themselves is far greater than his anger ever is. He is quick to 'rise' to show compassion every chance he gets. This is one of God's defining characteristics, but we can only appreciate it if we reject our idols and make the effort to see things from his point of view. When we practice what Paul called 'worldly sorrow' (2 Corinthians 7:10), or when we 'repent' only in the hope of receiving short-term worldly benefits, then God cannot show us the true depths of his love for us.

It is in the modest spiritual virtues of humility, repentance, and spiritual rest that we find true life and light. Jesus came to overcome the world by rising above it, not by dominating it, and this is also what he and his Father wish for us. Once we get a taste of God's gentle hand guiding us into spiritual truth, we can start to see the pathetic nature of our earthly idols. In turn, this shows us even more clearly our need for God. At any time, in any circumstance, God is waiting and hoping for us to start off on this lifelong process of getting to know him in a genuine way.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What motivates even believers to demand 'pleasant things' instead of the truth? In what ways are we especially vulnerable to this? Why is salvation found in repentance and rest? What does this mean in practice? Why is God so eager to have compassion on us? How can this help us to seek and know him?

Return To Him (Isaiah 30:27-31:9)

It is implicit in much of Isaiah's teaching that God allows us to have a choice between following the world's ways and following his ways. The prophet reminds us here of the consequences of each decision. Ultimately, all will honor God as Lord and King, for nothing in this world can stand against him. The prophet thus calls us to resist the temptation to 'rely on Egypt'.

In God's eagerness to know us, 'he comes from afar' (30:27-33) to meet us. The prophet reminds us again that God's presence is a blessing to believers but a horror to the unrepentant. The prophetic imagery here - of smoke, fire, cloudburst, hail, and other symbols of tumult - is as much spiritual as it is literal. The truest challenges to the soul come not from disasters or attacks, but from the clash between spiritual light and spiritual darkness.

As implied in the prophet's images, everyone will see God and will be forced to acknowledge his power. Even now, while the end of the physical universe lies in the future, this is still true. The mortal and perishable nature of everything that we now see and touch is readily apparent to all, yet most humans fight against this and deny it all of their lives.

This is why Jesus alone is able to fill our truest needs; "since the children are flesh and blood, he too shared their humanity so that by his death he would destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of

death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). The inner awareness of our undeniable mortality forces human consciousness to respond. Those who deny such an obvious reality must of necessity adopt some very distorted beliefs in a vain attempt to drive the unpleasant truth from their minds.

But as far as God is concerned, everything is already prepared. It is only his great patience and compassion that causes him to refrain from an immediate, complete revealing, with all the devastating consequences that would hold for the faithless. Using the image of Topheth* to stand for both the horror and the squalor of human sin, God warns that it is indeed "a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

* Topheth was the name given to an ancient location in the Valley of Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem's city walls. It originated as a site where idolatrous Canaanites would burn children as 'sacrifices'. Later it became a refuse dump, where fires burned constantly to prevent the spread of disease. Topheth and Gehenna (Hebrew for Valley of Hinnom) both came to be used by the ancient Jews to stand for their concept of hell. Here it is being used, at least in part, with this association in mind. Topheth is also referenced in 2 Kings 23:10, Jeremiah 7:31-32, Jeremiah 19:6, and Jeremiah 19:11-14.

With all this in mind, Isaiah again reproves his audience for its persistent practice of relying on Egypt rather than on God (31:1-9). Ever since the Exodus, when the foolish Israelites longed for the false security of Egyptian slavery rather than the challenges of entering the Promised Land, Egypt has stood as a symbol of a believer's ill-considered longing for easily attainable earthly things at the expense of more lasting spiritual blessings, which take more maturity to appreciate.

Both historically and symbolically, Jews and Christians have often longed for 'Egypt' when they realize how difficult it is to seek and worship God in spirit and in truth. Yet Egypt, both historically and figuratively, offers only false hopes. In history, Egypt invariably proved a weak ally to Israel and Judah, usually leaving them in more trouble than before. On a more figurative level, the things of the world that we so eagerly seek simply can never meet our deepest needs.

The prophet thus pleads for us to return to God and to reject our idols. Regardless of what this world's authorities and rulers may do to deceive us into thinking that they have all the answers, they can never provide the security, compassion, and grace that God offers. No matter how much we enjoy our earthly possessions, we can have them for only a short time. No matter how popular or loved we are by others, God will not ask for their opinion on Judgment Day.

We do not need to wait until the universe ends to see the fire from the Lord's furnace (verse 9). Just as Isaiah told Jerusalem that it was the furnace and the altar hearth (chapter 29), so too we as believers occupy a point where God's cleansing fire enters this world. We can decide whether to fan the sparks in our lives into a flame, or we can choose to try to stifle the fire before it spreads and embarrasses us or inconveniences us. This decision is equally important for each one of us, and the decisions we each make could also affect others as well.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what sense does God 'come from afar'? What implications does this have for our relationship with him? Why does Isaiah keep mentioning Egypt? Why does 'Egypt' provide only false hope? How can we avoid continually seeking help from the wrong things?

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

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**THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49**

Notes For Week Three: O Lord, Be Gracious To Us (Isaiah 32:1-33:24)

As Isaiah continues his comparison of true foundations and false foundations, he emphasizes our need for God and our dependence on God. The inability to appreciate our need for God's grace is a big reason why we often trust in the world rather than in God. Thus the prophet continually emphasizes that believers and unbelievers alike depend every moment on God's mercy.

Review

Isaiah begins by explaining that "a remnant will return" (Isaiah 1-27), and then he exhorts us to remember that God is "the sure foundation for your times" (Isaiah 28-49). For several chapters (Isaiah 28-35), he contrasts trusting in the world with trusting in God. To put genuine trust in God is a difficult but important task. Just as grain must be ground for it to be made useful (Isaiah 28:1-29:12), so also God will prepare us and discipline us as necessary.

The things of this world are inherently flawed and temporary, and so "the wisdom of the wise will perish" (Isaiah 29:13-31:9). The humble will rejoice in this hope, but the worldly will despair, for they worship with their mouths but not with their hearts. Despite humanity's pride and sin, the Lord longs to be gracious to us. He waits patiently, and he warns his people persistently as they continue to pursue ungodly alliances with the worldly. God wants only for us to return to him, yet the day will arrive when he comes from afar to render his judgment.

Opening The Eyes & Ears (Isaiah 32:1-20)

When Isaiah was first called to prophetic ministry, God cautioned him that the people he spoke to would be spiritually blind and deaf. Here, the prophet proclaims that the opposite can be true for those in the remnant. God's wisdom and grace help us to perceive and understand the world around us from a new and more accurate perspective. God opens our eyes and ears to the truth.

The prophet urges us to adopt and embrace a more godly perspective on life (32:1-8), especially since God has enabled us to do so. When a believer is able to look past the false viewpoints that the world promotes, he or she is then like water in the desert (one of Isaiah's images in verse 2), a source of life in a world of death. No matter how many worldly rationalizations we can come up with to the contrary, God's Word repeatedly calls us to try to transform the perspectives of the lost, not to cater to them.

We all have a need for our vision and our hearing to be corrected, so that we can see with what Paul called "the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18) instead of seeing only the superficial physical world. Only a faithful believer who has resolved "to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2) can see things for what they truly are.

The values of the world are hopelessly distorted. The world turns sins into virtues and virtues into sins. It teaches us to value the trivial and to trivialize the valuable. The greatest fools are given special honor and power, while the most honorable are treated like fools. So, churches that prattle about 'making the gospel relevant for today' or that hunt frantically for the most successful

human methodologies, are importing the world's faulty viewpoints into their 'ministry'. They thus produce nothing but a stillborn, blasphemous distortion of the gospel.

If we truly desire to seek God and his truth, then we need to be ready to live by faith, not by sight. Isaiah says that we have to endure many ills and evils in this world, "till the Spirit is poured upon us"* (32:9-20). By this he means that a problem in this earth may remain indefinitely, no matter how much we may wish it to go away, until God himself determines that it serves his purposes to change the situation.

* There is an obvious parallel between Isaiah's phrasing here and passages such as Acts 2:33 and 10:45. But Isaiah is talking about a somewhat different manifestation of the Spirit here, referring to the Spirit's presence whenever God makes his will or judgment known.

Complacency* and false security were constant problems in Isaiah's era, just as they are in our own. Putting trust in the forces, riches, or leaders of this earth makes it difficult to see God at work. It is indeed very easy to feel a sense of comfort, even pride, when we look at our physical surroundings and see the works of clever or strong humans who have diligently applied themselves to the goal of making this life more enjoyable or less hazardous. Yet such things are neither good nor bad in themselves. Like so many other things that Isaiah has discussed, they are pertinent to God only insofar as they do or do not point us to him.

* Although Isaiah specifically reproaches the women for being complacent, this should not be construed as an indication that they were more so than the men. The prophets sometimes address women for rhetorical or symbolic effect, as is the case here. Since women would be particularly likely to suffer during times of deprivation, they especially should be on guard against a sense of false security. When they are not doing so, this is an indication of how complacent the community as a whole has become.

God can make the desert fertile whenever he wishes, but it is not always his wish to do so. He does what is most likely to help blind, stubborn humans to seek him, not what those blind, stubborn humans think he ought to do to make them 'happy' in the short-term present. As the prophet teaches us here, the fruit of righteousness is not fleshly pleasure, but spiritual peace and spiritual confidence.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How can a believer be like water in a desert? How does this compare with Isaiah's other images in verse 2? Why does the world fail to see things for what they really are? Is this true in all areas of life? Why are complacency and false security spiritually dangerous? What reasons might God have for withholding relief from earthly problems? Will we usually be able to know his reasons? What spiritual benefits are there to enduring earthly hardships? Can only believers benefit?

Our Need For God (Isaiah 33:1-6)

The worldly not only deny their own need For God, but also do their best to keep others from seeing the same thing. Even believers often have their spiritual vision clouded by the world's sin and injustice. In particular, we become discouraged when we value the same things that the worldly do. God's desire is to be the sure foundation that provides us with what really matters.

In this life, the destroyers and traitors of this world frequently benefit from their sins (33:1). If we expect God to deal with each one so that they are always directly punished now, then we shall be disappointed. But we can be assured that such persons eventually come to an appropriate end. Their own nature punishes them and poisons their lives more than either they or

we may realize. Selfish ambition, deceit, violence, and other such sins may be romanticized in popular culture, but in reality they are shabby qualities that degrade and destroy those who practice them.

The more that we are humble enough to see things clearly, the more eager we shall be to call upon God to be our strength (33:2-4). He and he alone is our true strength every morning, indeed every moment. God's restrained power contrasts sharply with the ways that human authorities so eagerly and willfully exploit any opportunity to call attention to the position that they have. If God were ever to unleash his full power upon this earth, it would be as if the earth were engulfed by a galaxy-sized swarm of locusts*, for nothing physical can stand for a moment against God's transcendent strength.

* Locusts are often used as a prophetic symbol. They may have a number of literal meanings, but in each case they are used to represent an overpowering and uncontrollable force. The noise of a locust swarm also suggests a force that causes confusion and disorientation.

So God is the sure foundation on which we should build everything else (33:5-6); he is the source of all that we need or will need. He is, as the prophet vividly describes him to be, a rich store in which we can find everything that has real and lasting worth. If God wished to, he could outdo anyone in the world at offering us an unending supply of this world's treasures. But he cares about us too much to spoil us in such a foolish way.

The key to this treasure that God offers - for it is a treasure, a priceless chance to understand what really matters and to have what we most badly need - is not good behavior or extensive knowledge or human talent, but the fear of the Lord. This is a healthy and humble kind of fear, not the shallow self-interested kind of fear that we see so often in the world. To fear God is to acknowledge him as the transcendent Lord and Creator, on whom we must rely each moment.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kind of punishment does Isaiah promise for destroyers and traitors? How can we learn to acknowledge God as our constant source of strength? What kind of treasures does God have for us? What does Isaiah mean by 'the fear of the Lord'? Why is this the key to God's spiritual blessings?

Now Will I Arise (Isaiah 33:7-24)

From time to time, God has risen up in order to intervene directly in the affairs of this world, and has made his presence clear to the discerning. Then also, the time will come someday when God will rise to declare his final judgment on us all. But those who seek God earnestly now, and who allow him to open their eyes and ears, can already see him rise in the hearts of his remnant.

God's desire for his dear children is not for them to rule this earth, but rather that they can rise above a ruined world (33:7-12). Although the world tries to deny the truth by offering us a constant supply of false hopes, it is a bleak landscape* indeed that we see in the physical world. The prophet's figurative depictions emphasize the empty nature of life without God as its focus.

* The series of geographical references in verse 9 is meant to portray even the most fertile and desirable regions as becoming wastelands.

God is always exalted by comparison with the world, even if he usually watches unobtrusively instead of demanding immediate recognition. It only takes improved discernment and a dose of humility to appreciate how much more God offers than the world does.

Isaiah promises that "your eyes will see the king" (33:13-24), and this promise still holds true. Humans hold an extraordinary number of contrasting views of God, yet such opinions reflect on those who hold them, not on God, who is what he is. To those who pridefully refuse to accept God as their Lord, he is a consuming fire, whose power is a fearful threat that they cannot deny in their hearts, even if their arrogant lips mock him or curse him.

To those who see things more clearly, the King has great beauty. For those who trust him, he can turn their terror into peace, not by taking away their problems in this earth but by giving them the hope of rising above this world and its troubles. The good fruits of spiritual health and of the forgiveness of sins allow us to see this world from the safer perspective of eternity. Trusting in the heavenly King gives us a foundation that nothing in this world can destroy.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why don't most persons in this world want to deal with the problem of their eternal destiny? Can we ever change this? How can God be exalted in a world filled with sin and sorrow? How does our understanding of God affect our feelings about events in this life? What spiritual blessings does Isaiah mention in this passage? How can we learn better to appreciate these kinds of blessings?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2008

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Four: A Highway Will Be There (Isaiah 34:1-35:10)

Isaiah's contrast between trusting in the world and trusting in God now reaches a climax. Using some of his strongest language yet, the prophet depicts the utter destruction that awaits everyone and everything in this world that presumes to stand against God. Then, he provides us with a vision of the spiritual blessings that God wishes to give to the remnant of his people.

Review Of Recent Classes

The prophet spends several chapters (Isaiah 28-35) comparing those who trust in the things of this world with those who trust in God. As grain must be ground before it becomes useful, so God must guide the faithful through many things to teach them some difficult but important lessons (Isaiah 28:1-29:12). The wisdom of those who are wise in this world will perish (Isaiah 29:13-31:9), but God will teach and provide his faithful remnant with all that they need.

When we are able to see the things of this world for what they really are, the natural response of the faithful is to call out for our Lord to be gracious to us (Isaiah 32:1-33:24). We need his help to open our eyes and ears (recall the words God spoke to Isaiah when he first called him to prophetic ministry), and to understand that the true fruit of righteousness is found in spiritual blessings that cannot be calculated by this world's common measures.

Seeing our own need for God is a difficult but all-important step towards spiritual growth, just as the key to God's spiritual treasures is to develop the healthy kind of fear of God, an awe of his majesty that leads us to love him and respect him at the same time. God will always arise just when he knows that the time is right, never a moment too soon or too late. Just as the prophet saw God on his throne, so our eyes can and will see the King in his full glory.

Judgment Upon All Earthly Nations (Isaiah 34:1-17)

The faithful prophet makes a final, comprehensive statement of the ultimate doom that is in store for all earthly nations and powers. Using language even more harsh and graphic than before, Isaiah emphasizes the certainty and vehemence with which God will bring an end to the things of this world. The nation of Edom is the symbolic object of much of the prophet's detailed imagery.

In depicting the sky rolled up like a scroll, with similar fates befalling other parts of the physical universe (34:1-7), Isaiah is expanding on the imagery he used earlier (Isaiah 24) to describe the temporary nature of this earth. Here, though, he places more emphasis on God's unyielding wrath towards the sin and willful unbelief of the world. God's decision someday to do away with the physical universe is not an arbitrary one; it is necessary in view of his own righteousness.

The tumultuous end of everything that the prophet describes should not be taken literally in all its details, yet for all that it makes the point without leaving room for doubt. All that we now see and touch is merely temporary, brought into being by God's will and continuing for a time to

exist by God's grace. We who claim to believe in God should realize that, if he could create the universe, then for him to do away with it would be even easier. Too often, our belief in God as Creator makes us proud, and makes us feel superior to those who refuse to accept the creation. It should instead make us humble, in the knowledge of the overwhelming power of God.

Isaiah spends much of this passage referring specifically to Edom*, which serves here as a stand-in for all worldly nations and rulers. Edom was closely related to Israel, but it held a long-standing antagonism towards its brother nation**. It thus makes an appropriate metaphor for the fate of the unbelievers of this world.

* Edom is the nation descended from Esau, Jacob's brother. The name Edom, which means 'red', was one of Esau's nicknames (Genesis 25:29-30). The nation of Edom was in the hill country of Seir, south of the Dead Sea. The name Mount Seir is also sometimes used metaphorically to refer to Edom.

** Genesis 25:19-34 and 26:34-27:46 explain the origins of the personal rivalry between Jacob and Esau. The hostility between the nations descended from them can be seen in passages such as Numbers 20:14-21 and Judges 11:14-27. See also the previous notes on Isaiah 21:11-12.

We are all created as brothers and sisters, whether we are believers or unbelievers, regardless of time, place, or culture. Yet humanity has always been divided by the presence or the lack of faith in the living God. And, unfortunately, both believers and unbelievers alike have long indulged in the sins of rivalry, anger, and envy towards those who think differently. 'Edom' thus stands for all such behavior and all such attitudes.

Therefore Isaiah's prophetic imagery about the 'year of retribution' (34:8-17) is not directed only at the literal nation of Edom, but instead is expressive of God's pent-up wrath against all the sins of the world. God withholds the due punishment for our sins, giving us all the chance to repent and to seek forgiveness. But humans too often use God's patience as an excuse for complacency. Even most persons who call themselves Christians barely appreciate their need for God's continual mercy and grace.

Isaiah describes the unleashing of God's wrath as part of God's commitment to "uphold Zion's cause" (verse 8). As with Edom, Zion here stands not for the physical nation of Israel but for the remnant, those from every nation who truly put their faith in God. Since God calls believers to live selflessly, even to the point of abandoning their earthly goals and agendas, those in the remnant must make sacrifices that the worldly would not even consider.

In upholding Zion's cause, then, God does not give extra earthly rewards to the remnant, but rather makes worthless the ill-gotten gains of the sinful. It is this that Isaiah expresses with his imagery of Edom laid desolate. By no means will the sinful of this world be punished on earth for every sin they have committed. For the sake of those who might someday believe, God defers full punishment until after we each have had every opportunity to turn to him.

Isaiah goes on to depict in some detail the land of Edom being turned into a kingdom of animals. The implication is that only in nature is this earth treated and appreciated as God meant it to be, for every living thing other than human beings lives in exactly the way that God intended. The imagery provides a link with the opening verses of the book, when Isaiah unfavorably compared human faithlessness with the natural faithfulness of nature.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does God emphasize the ultimate devastation of the physical earth? How ought we to respond? How are the symbols of Edom and Zion used here? Why does Isaiah do this? Explain what Isaiah is saying by depicting Edom (the unbelieving world) being left to the animals after the humans are destroyed.

The Way Of Holiness (Isaiah 35:1-10)

An abrupt change of tone now reflects Isaiah's desire to help us understand God's character in its entirety. If God will unleash such devastating discipline upon an unbelieving world, it is only because of the grandeur of what he truly wishes to give to everyone. Isaiah's depiction of the Way Of Holiness encourages us to appreciate the spiritual blessings that come to the remnant.

The prophet's imagery of rejoicing in the desert (35:1-7) expresses the heart of what God offers to the remnant through his grace, compassion, and mercy. All of these images depict life emerging in unexpected places and in unexpected ways. Deserts and wilderness areas suddenly become full of life, the weak and fearful become strong, and the afflicted become healthy.

These images of renewal, strengthening, and relief illustrate God's desire to bless those who turn to him in weakness and humility by giving them the kind of spiritual life that the world cannot offer: a real purpose, a real hope, a real opportunity to know what life is like without worship of self and idols. Isaiah depicts a spiritual 'ecosystem', in which even humanity can live in the harmony that nature does. This contrasts deliberately with the opposite images in chapter 34.

In this spiritual environment (of which Isaiah describes a different aspect in 11:6-9), the things that matter are not material objects, fame, or selfish ambitions, but instead the fruits of the Spirit. Such a way of life is possible only for the remnant in Jesus, for only through the grace and promises we receive from him can we find the faith that allows us to live as he calls us to do.

The prophet's image of a highway* for the remnant adds emphasis to these ideas (35:8-10). On this highway, as with the 'narrow road' that Jesus described (Matthew 7:14), there is nothing unclean or wicked to tempt or distress the faithful. Likewise, they are safe from danger, with nothing and no one to attack them. There is nothing but singing, gladness, and life.

* On the significance of this image, see Isaiah 11:16 and 19:23, along with the notes to those passages.

It is worth comparing these images with reality, as both we and God know it. The ideal characteristics of the highway will be realized fully when we are with God in eternity. But they are also true now in a limited but still important sense. Believers do face dangers of all kinds in this world - the same physical dangers as everyone else faces, plus the attacks on our faith. But remember that Jesus said that "no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28-29).

In Jesus, no outside force can take away our faith or God's grace. Only our own decisions can do so. So too, nothing unclean or wicked can tempt us against our own will. And nothing except our own self-will can prevent us from getting closer to God through prayer and meditation. These may not be the promises that we wanted to get from God, but they are the ones we do have. And, when we are able to pull away from our earthly mind-sets so that we can appreciate

what God offers us, we shall see how truly blessed we are that he gives us what we need, and not necessarily what we desire.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what ways does God provide the faithful with life where it would not normally be expected? How do Isaiah's images compare with Jesus' statement in John 10:10 about 'life to the full'? What do Isaiah's highway images represent (here and earlier)? In what sense can we now experience the characteristics of this highway? In what sense will we experience them later?

Summary & Preview

Isaiah began by explaining to us that, "a remnant will return" (Isaiah 1-27). This awareness helps us to make sense of the things that God does and does not do in this world. Once we understand that, we are called to make God and God alone "the sure foundation for your times" (Isaiah 28-49). Simply believing in God, and simply accepting without argument his identity as Creator and Redeemer, is hardly enough to give us a relationship with him. So the prophet urges us to build everything in our lives on an understanding and an appreciation of God and his will.

In doing this, one of the significant challenges we face is the choice between trusting in the world and trusting in God (Isaiah 28-35). Whether or not we wish to make a conscious choice, each of us has decided in his or her heart whether to trust fully in God's values, God's perspective, and God's will, or to expect these to share influence with the world's values and perspectives and will. Fortunately, no matter what we have done in the past, God stands ready at any moment to have compassion on us when we are ready to put our faith and hope in him alone.

Next time, we shall begin a new section of the book (Isaiah 36-39), which focuses primarily on the lessons we can learn from the interactions between the prophet Isaiah and King Hezekiah. Hezekiah was often weak, and sometimes foolish, but his faith and humility made it possible for God to guide and protect him. The situations in these chapters will also furnish some practical illustrations of principles we have seen previously in Isaiah.

After that, Isaiah will focus on one of his best-remembered themes, the relationship between the Lord and his servant* (Isaiah 40-49). In all of these topics, the prophet provides us with some thoughts and ideas that can help us with the lifelong challenge of making God the sure foundation for our lives.

* The 'servant' is one of Isaiah's most multi-faceted images. Most prominently, the servant looks ahead to the Messiah Jesus. In other respects, the servant may represent Israel. God's people in general, Isaiah himself, the ideal believer, or the average believer.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What general lessons or themes stand out in Isaiah 28-35? Based on the brief summaries above, what might we hope to see or learn from upcoming sections of the book? How might all these ideas fit together?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2008
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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Five: The Zeal Of The Lord Almighty (Isaiah 36:1-37:38)

Isaiah now recounts some historical events in which he played a part. In 701 BC, what many of Isaiah's fellow citizens had long feared finally took place, when Assyria invaded Judah. The incidents in these two chapters form a deliberate contrast with the crisis Isaiah described in chapters 7-8. Then, faithless King Ahaz ignored God's prophet, but that won't happen this time.

Review Of Recent Classes

In Isaiah 28-35, the prophet contrasts those who trust in this world with those who trust in God. To explain how God works in calling and preparing his remnant, Isaiah reminds us that grain must be ground, in order to be made useful (Isaiah 28:1-29:12). He also warns that the wisdom of those who are wise in this world will perish (Isaiah 29:13-31:9).

We who seek God's will and God's truth ought thus to call to our Lord, asking him to be gracious to us (Isaiah 32:1-33:24). He is gracious, and assures us that a highway will always be there for anyone, of any time and place, who wishes to know God (Isaiah 34:1-35:10). This highway will find its complete fulfillment in the Messiah, who will bring new life to those who believe in him.

Turning from general themes to specific situations, the prophet now describes (Isaiah 36-39) some interactions between himself and King Hezekiah. These historical incidents hold several useful lessons for us, and they also set the stage for Isaiah's 'servant' passages in Isaiah 40-49. This week's study (Isaiah 36-37) is paralleled by 2 Kings 18:17-19:37 and 2 Chronicles 32:1-21.

Sennacherib's Attack & Threats (Isaiah 36:1-22)

Sennacherib has been king of the Assyrian Empire for four years, and has spent most of that time at war*, determined to establish a reputation as a strong ruler who is not to be trifled with. Now it is Judah's turn to suffer, and the situation will provide a severe test of the faith of its people and of its own king, Hezekiah. The first challenge comes to a group of the king's officials.

* Sennacherib succeeded his father Sargon II in 705 BC, and soon embarked on a campaign against Babylon, designed to discourage Babylon's growing ambitions in the region. He also attacked Babylon's allies Aram and Elam. The attack on Judah came because of Judah's diplomatic relations with Egypt and Cush, which were an ill-conceived means of defense against Assyria (see the notes to Isaiah 18-20).

The Assyrians start their assault on Jerusalem with a campaign of intimidation (36:1-10). As Isaiah mentions, Assyria had captured several of Judah's fortified cities*, isolating Jerusalem. But because of Hezekiah's re-design of the city's water supply*, Jerusalem could still withstand a lengthy siege. So the Assyrians hoped to demoralize the defenders and get them to surrender.

* Sennacherib's account in the Assyrian chronicles boastfully claims that he captured 46 cities in Judah, but this has to be an exaggeration. He probably counts many small villages and settlements as 'cities'.

** See the notes to Isaiah 22:9.

So the Assyrian commander makes an aggressive, hostile speech, essentially demanding an immediate surrender, and expressing the certainty that the city will eventually fall anyway. He combines threats and lies, two very common tactics that are used against the faithful in every era.

The Assyrians know that direct assault will be difficult, but also that intimidation can make a foe forget its own defensive resources. Then, when the commander implies that the city might be rewarded for its surrender, this is surely a lie. Also, the commander quotes Hezekiah's ban on high places* out of its context, making it sound as if Hezekiah doubted God's power. This time, these tactics failed, but threats and lies are often very effective against Christians.

* See, for example, 2 Kings 18:3-4. The high places were locations outside of Jerusalem where the people made up their own rituals to 'worship' God, usually mixing together superficial imitations of genuine Levitical practice with idolatrous and/or immoral acts. God consistently called for the removal of the high places, but only on rare occasions did someone like Hezekiah make the effort to do so.

When the world threatens us with unpopularity, we too often scramble to convince them that we don't take God all that seriously. When the world says that some imagined crisis demands our attention, or that some new product or expert can change our lives, we too often rush to show that we are not 'out of touch', becoming as absorbed in earthly affairs as any pagan. When self-appointed experts tell us that to be successful we have to make the gospel 'relevant', we too easily sacrifice truth and integrity for the sake of numerical or financial success.

Here, though, the people are an example to us by standing firm (36:11-22). The king's officials* begin the task of replying to the Assyrian commander with the request that they converse in Aramaic**, rather than Hebrew, so that the soldiers and residents of Jerusalem would not hear any of the Assyrian threats or demands. Yet it will turn out that these fears are unnecessary.

* Notice (verse 3) that Shebna has been demoted to secretary, and Eliakim has been promoted to palace administrator, in keeping with Isaiah's pronouncement in Isaiah 22:15-24.

** In Isaiah's lifetime, Aramaic was used as a diplomatic language, but the average Israelite would not have been familiar with it. By the time of Jesus, though, Aramaic had become the everyday language used by most Jews, and Hebrew had become mostly an academic language.

The Assyrian commander has anticipated their defense, and indeed he is quite well-informed about his intended victims. He knows that Hezekiah will trust in God, and that the king will exhort the people to do likewise. So the commander points out the many 'gods' of other nations that could not stop the Assyrians from conquering their nations. He adds some graphic images of the horrifying fates that can befall the trapped residents of a besieged city.

It is a clever attack, but the people are ready. The king knew how easily intimidated his fellow Judeans were (perhaps remembering how the nation had mishandled similar situations under his father), so he told them simply to remain silent. If they had tried to reason or debate with the Assyrians, things could have gone wrong. But the king gives them an easy role to play, and they heed his advice. The officials just report everything to the king, and then await his further plans.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Was anything logically wrong with what the Assyrian commander said? What situations might be similar to the threats and lies that the people face here? Why do these often work? Why did the king tell the people to remain silent?

A Day Of Distress (Isaiah 37:1-20)

When Hezekiah hears the report, he is quite shaken, and he fully understands the danger that he and his city are in. Yet, despite his fear, he does not hesitate to do the best thing possible, by turning to God for help. This is a true demonstration of faith, for the king has no idea what will happen or what God will choose to do or not to do, yet he trusts God in any case.

Feeling the weight of responsibility, the king humbly displays his distress and goes straight to the temple. There, he deems it wise to find out what the prophet Isaiah might think (37:1-13). This is quite a contrast to his father Ahaz's insolent dismissal of Isaiah's advice (Isaiah 7). Again, we can wonder how much Hezekiah may have learned from his father's mistakes. In any case, it is clear that God can use even a bad example to teach someone faithful like Hezekiah.

In the request he sends to Isaiah, the king acknowledges his fear, and even asks the prophet to, if necessary, "pray for the remnant that still survives". He is prepared to put his faith completely in God, no matter what God's will or plans may be*. Isaiah's reply is simple and encouraging, for he assures the king that he need not be afraid. God will arrange for Sennacherib to be distracted and eventually eliminated for his blasphemies.

* Just 21 years earlier, Hezekiah had seen the Assyrians conquer the kingdom of the northern tribes of Israel, an event widely understood to have happened because of their idolatry and sin. The king seems clearly to have realized that it could someday be God's will for the same thing to happen to Judah.

Sennacherib is indeed temporarily distracted, needing to deal with a rival from the south, but he never stops making threats against Hezekiah and Judah. Once more he reminds them of the foreign 'gods' whose nations have been destroyed by Assyria. Notice how both he and his commander use the same arguments over and over again. The world really has very few basic tactics to rely upon, so they use them again and again. Unfortunately, many believers allow these lame methods to intimidate or distract them - an indication of our need for spiritual growth.

Upon hearing back from his messengers, Hezekiah prays (37:14-20), having gained confidence from the prophet's reply. He honors God as the only God and the only true source of hope and help. He recognizes the danger from Assyria for what it is, not minimizing the earthly danger. But now, after hearing Isaiah's words of divine assurance, Hezekiah prays in expectation of deliverance, seeing it as a way "that all may know" that God, unlike this world's idols, is alive.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What expectations does Hezekiah have when he first consults Isaiah? Why might God have only distracted Sennacherib at this point, rather than destroying him now? How has Hezekiah's perspective changed when he prays? What has caused him to change his expectations? What should we learn from this?

Who Is It You Have Insulted? (Isaiah 37:21-38)

Even the most powerful and most violent of humans is powerless against God. On this occasion, the dreaded Sennacherib has insulted a being far greater than himself, and he will now experience the consequences. While we should not naively expect evildoers always to be punished on this earth, we can always rest assured that God ultimately will deal with them.

Isaiah now sends an unsolicited message to the king, in which Assyria's pride is rebuked and judged (37:21-29). In it, God speaks rhetorically to Sennacherib, but the message is just as much for believers like us who need constantly to be reminded to leave matters of judgment and deliverance to God, not to earthly leaders, experts, or governments.

Reprobates like Sennacherib frighten and attack us, but their real offense is against God. We are too easily provoked into emotional responses to attacks on our idols, and too slow to recognize when it is God who is being blasphemed. No earthly institution deserves our emotional allegiance, so we ought not to worry about defending them. God well merits our allegiance, but he is more than capable of defending himself.

Isaiah's message is best read and considered in its entirety, as over-analysis of details can obscure its poetic force. For example, the prophet's rhetorical question, "have you not heard?" is directed in part against the unbeliever Sennacherib, but just as much to doubting believers who become unduly intimidated by earthly power. The imagery that accompanies provides further encouragement for us to transform our perspective.

Particularly worth noting is God's assurance to the proud Assyrian ruler that, "I will make you return by the way you came". The wealthy, the powerful, and the famous invariably deceive themselves into thinking that they have earned their prominence. They do everything possible to promote an image of themselves as more talented, more intelligent, or more righteous than the average person. Human nature being what it is, even believers complacently accept such lies.

But the truth is that no human is of any greater worth to God than any other. Whatever and whoever we may be in this world, we owe it to God's grace, and to nothing but God's grace. God can humble any of us at any time. If we are wise, we shall realize this and gladly admit it here on earth, so that we will not have to admit it reluctantly on Judgment Day.

Isaiah also has a message for Hezekiah (37:30-35). God will deliver his people, but they will have to make do by faith. Judah has, after all, contributed to the situation by its foolish worldly alliances. So for two years Judah will need to rely on natural growth, not agriculture, for its food. God often must remind us of how helpless we are without him, because of how easily we become intoxicated by our own 'brilliant' plans and programs. We are kept safe and are blessed because of God's zeal (desire) for us, never by our much weaker zeal for him.

The prophet also speaks of a remnant of survivors that will come from this ordeal (verse 32). Although the city will not fall this time, the nation has suffered significant discipline and loss. And it is a sad fact of history that they still did not really change from the heart, so eventually God's discipline would be more complete, with the corresponding remnant much smaller.

The fate of Sennacherib and his army (37:36-38) illustrates the ultimate fruits of ambition and idolatry. The army practically self-destructs*, while Sennacherib goes home in humiliation, later to be killed by his own sons**. While most earthly malefactors will not suffer such direct punishment for their misdeeds, their ultimate fate will be no better. Believers should focus less on God's timing in rendering judgment, and instead remember the certainty of God's judgment.

* Skeptics like to criticize the Scripture accounts, because Sennacherib's chronicle does not acknowledge any such loss. But Assyrian chronicles never acknowledge anything negative! The historical fact of Assyria's sudden withdrawal is not deniable, and all Isaiah does is to supply the reason for it.

** The assassination actually happened 19 or 20 years later, not immediately afterwards. To God, the time in between was unimportant, since Sennacherib personally would not again be a real threat to Judah.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why would Isaiah now send a message without being asked for one? Why does he address the Assyrian ruler? What should believers learn from his remarks to Sennacherib? What is the prophet's message to Hezekiah? What does this message mean to us? What conclusions should we draw from Assyria's defeat?

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

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Six: In The Land Of The Living (Isaiah 38:1-39:8)

In these chapters, Isaiah recounts some events that at first may seem insignificant, especially in comparison with the crisis of the Assyrian attack described in previous passages. But God is always at work, and is always watching our faith at all moments. And his perspective on events on this earth can be quite different from ours, as the incidents in these chapters will illustrate.

After a series of prophetic discourses that contrast trusting in the world with trusting in God (Isaiah 28-35), the prophet turns to a straightforward narrative of several events involving himself and King Hezekiah (Isaiah 36-39). The prophet and the king parallel, on a lower level, the relationship between the Lord and his servant, which Isaiah will discuss later.

When Assyria attacked Jerusalem in 701 BC, the city was saved only by "the zeal of the Lord Almighty" (36:1-37:38). The Assyrian king Sennacherib began his attack through intimidation, using a combination of threats and lies not altogether different from the assaults that the worldly attempt on believers today. It was easy to discredit Egypt, which Hezekiah had ill-advisedly chosen as a military ally. But when the Assyrians tried to discredit God, the people stood firm and did not react, simply remaining silent as Hezekiah had advised.

Hezekiah himself prays earnestly, considering the situation a day of distress, and knowing that it is beyond his own abilities. So he seeks word from Isaiah, who assures the king that God will protect the city. Hezekiah then prays again, this time with more confidence. Isaiah then sends word again, with a message to both kings. He reminds them that the Assyrians have not insulted Judah, but God, and that God will bring them down. He assures Judah of deliverance because of God's desire for them, but there will be some hardships for a while. The city is delivered without a fight when God strikes down Sennacherib's army.

A Personal Request (Isaiah 38:1-22)

The unusual incident in this chapter* is another event in which both Hezekiah and Isaiah participated. But in contrast with the international events that took place in the previous passage, this involves only Hezekiah's personal interest and well-being. The king's interactions with God show us some unexpected aspects of God's viewpoint on our lives in this world.

* See also the account in 2 Kings 20:1-11 and the brief reference in 2 Chronicles 32:24.

We first discover a blunt and surprising prophecy (38:1-3), as Isaiah unexpectedly tells an ailing Hezekiah to prepare for death. With his illness apparently fatal, plus the ongoing threats from Assyria*, Hezekiah is thrown into despair. Regardless of what his exact perspective is - and we can do little more than speculate on that - he again prays before doing anything else.

* Although verse 6 could indicate that the illness took place in the middle of the Assyrian siege, it is equally likely that God was only reassuring Hezekiah about any further threats from Assyria.

In response, a reprieve is announced (38:4-9). God explains only that he has taken note of the king's prayer and tears, and he grants Hezekiah's request for a sign of assurance (indicated in verse 22). To confirm his willingness to add fifteen more years to the king's life, God causes a

shadow in the palace hallway to move backwards*. Though Hezekiah often shows weakness of mind, he has a faithful heart that God blesses (as he blessed a similar request from the fearful Gideon in Judges 6:36-40). Both God's evident compassion and Hezekiah's sincerity are clear, even if we cannot deduce motives for God's original pronouncement or for his change of mind.

* The nature of this miraculous sign is explained more clearly in 2 Kings 20:8-11.

In any case, it is Hezekiah's meditation on his recovery that provides the main lessons of this chapter (38:10-22). His thoughts and feelings about "the land of the living" do not teach rules or methods, but rather cause us to ponder the ways and the reasons that God acts as he does or doesn't in our earthly lives. When commentators try to deduce why God told Hezekiah he would die, or speculate on what Hezekiah said or did to get the extra fifteen years, they miss the point.

Like much else in Isaiah, this passage reminds us that faithfully searching for the truth is in itself of spiritual benefit, and it can often be as valuable as, or even more than, knowing all the answers. To seek truth in the way God wishes us to do takes humility, a quality whose importance to God has been shown repeatedly throughout Isaiah. In all that Hezekiah does, even his mistakes, he maintains a clear awareness of his dependence on God's mercy and God's grace.

Even after his recovery, the king remembers the gloom he felt when he thought he would die. It is interesting to note the things that he would most regret upon leaving the earth sooner than he expected, for it is not sensual pleasures or riches that he would miss. That he could no longer see God "in the land of the living", and that he would "no longer . . . look on mankind" matter more. Hezekiah senses, without even being able to put it into adequate words, something God very much wants us to consider.

The true importance of events, decisions, and developments in this world is found only insofar as they help us to see God, encourage us to seek God, and teach us to put our faith in God. Human activities, whether they involve world leaders or obscure persons, are all of equal unimportance in themselves. But all of them, whether good or bad, important or insignificant from an earthly perspective, offer us the chance to see something about God and about spiritual reality.

Thus Hezekiah is able to feel the benefit even from his physical agony and emotional distress, for he has learned to appreciate life in this world from a new point of view. His comment to God that, "the grave cannot praise you" again points out one of the aspects of faith that we often overlook. He is by no means discounting the hope of being with God after his physical death*, but rather pointing out how special it is to God that some of us love and praise him here, even though we cannot physically see him or tangibly see his hand at work. The kind of faith that living human believers show now is something that cannot, by definition, exist in heaven.

* The ancient Jews had a clear awareness of an afterlife, though they often held differing viewpoints. See also the questions below.

This interaction between Isaiah and Hezekiah shows us that, to God, a personal illness is just as important as a national emergency - but in both cases, not for the reasons we would usually think of. Isaiah's own role is simply that of a faithful proclaimer of God's Word and will. Isaiah has no outstanding talents of his own, and the only way he can truly help and love Hezekiah (or anyone else) is by telling the truth, to the best of his ability. Hezekiah, on the other hand, is a faithful servant, yet one still full of weakness, just like us. In all circumstances, he does his best to remember that everything truly is in God's hands, not his.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kinds of situations might put us in a position similar to Hezekiah's here? Can we tell why he was upset at the thought of dying? Do we know what he may have expected? What does Hezekiah's prayer teach us about his view of this world? What should be important to us about our lives here? What does Hezekiah mean that, "the dead cannot praise you"?

Guests From Babylon (Isaiah 39:1-8)

Hezekiah's good-hearted but rather careless nature is particularly clear in this account of him receiving visitors from Babylon. Without meaning any harm, he helps to pave the way for some future problems for Judah. Yet the emphasis of Isaiah's narrative is not so much on what is or is not a mistake, so much as on the attitudes and perspectives that God wants to teach his servant.

When Hezekiah recovers from his illness and is greeted by envoys from Babylon, he plays the open-handed host, taking them on a complete guided tour (39:1-2). This seemingly simple incident will again take on an unanticipated significance, which is much easier to see from our vantage point many centuries later. Babylon during the reign of Merodach-Baladan (see verse 1) was desperately trying to maintain some semblance of independence from Assyria*, and indeed it is probable that Merodach-Baladan himself was in exile** when he wrote to Hezekiah.

* Sennacherib more than once assaulted Babylon, and throughout his reign he strove to destroy Babylonian independence. In this he was generally quite successful.

** Merodach-Baladan was twice deposed as king of Babylon due to Assyrian threats and pressure. In 710 BC, he was driven out of the city by Sargon II (Sennacherib's father), who then proclaimed himself king of Babylon (in addition to being king of Assyria). After Sargon's death, Merodach-Baladan successfully reclaimed the city from Sennacherib, but soon afterwards was driven out again in 702 BC. For some years afterward, Merodach-Baladan lived in exile, while an Assyrian puppet ruler governed the city of Babylon.

So, the Babylonians are looking for allies to share the with them the risk of opposing Assyria's power, but Hezekiah's (overly) trusting nature seems to make him oblivious to this. He simply enjoys displaying Judah's treasures to his guests. While not sinful, that doesn't make it wise. Indeed, despite Hezekiah's good intentions, it was probably a foolish thing to do.

Therefore Isaiah, learning about the Babylonian visitors, gives Hezekiah a stark look into the future (39:3-8). First he questions the king, and while Hezekiah's answers confirm the prophet's fears, the king's openness and honesty seem also to confirm that he acted out of carelessness, not pride or ego. Yet regardless of the reason, the information that the Babylonian envoys have discovered will one day be used against Judah. The knowledge of Judah's riches will make its way to Babylon, where it will eventually provide a motive for aggression and conquest.

For, as Isaiah now reveals, the time will come when Babylon, having replaced Assyria as the ruthless dominators of Western Asia, will attack Judah just as Assyria tried to do. But the Babylonian attack will be successful. Instead of divine deliverance, there will be looting and exile. Many of the very same objects that Hezekiah has just so eagerly displayed will be seized and carted off to Babylon, while many of Hezekiah's own descendants will be enslaved*.

* The Babylonians attacked Jerusalem three times, in 606 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC. Each time, they took larger portions of loot and captives; and the final time they destroyed the city and enslaved all but the oldest and weakest residents.

Hezekiah's response is rather ambiguous*, at least when we have only the printed word to go on. On the surface, at least, he accepts this news just as he has always accepted whatever God has told him through the prophet. Yet we are also told that he does not mind, at least in part, because he is content in knowing that "there will be peace and security in my lifetime" (verse 8).

* See also the comments in 2 Chronicles 32:25-26, 32:31. These imply that indeed Hezekiah was to some degree at fault in this series of events, but also that God appreciated Hezekiah's basic faithfulness enough to make sure that he himself did not have to live through the terrors of conquest and exile. God thus seems deliberately to have chosen to give the king the blessing of peace and security in his lifetime.

It is hard not to suspect that Hezekiah has, to some degree, a sense of false comfort, since he does not seem concerned about the suffering that a future generation will have to endure, and to which he may have contributed in a small way. Yet, again he simply reflects our own nature. When we are honest with ourselves, we realize that only on occasion can we rise above our fleshly desires. Fortunately, God can always enable us to do this when it matters most.

While we are once again faced in this story with some details for which we cannot have the definitive answers that our curiosity desires, we can still see some important points. Hezekiah, in his role as a faithful servant, is reminded that his responsibilities on this earth go beyond the mere avoidance of sin. He has also learned (again) that even the (seemingly) smallest of actions can have unexpected effects. So once again we, like Hezekiah, are reminded of the need to place all things in this world in God's hands. It is much better to be aware of our weakness than to try to convince ourselves that we are strong enough to stand on our own.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What may have motivated Hezekiah? Why was he unable to suspect any danger from the Babylonians? How might we be able to apply what we learn from this passage? How does Hezekiah take the news from Isaiah? Can we tell exactly what his perspective was? What definite lessons can we learn from it?

Summary & Preview

In teaching us about the difference between trusting in God and trusting in the things of this world, Isaiah first discussed these things from a largely poetic perspective (chapters 28-35). Now he has also used a series of historical events (chapters 36-39) to illustrate some of the same principles. The prophet Isaiah and king Hezekiah are also a type of parallel between God (in that Isaiah only speaks what he has learned from God, not his own opinions) and a weak but faithful servant of God.

Next (Isaiah 40-49), Isaiah will expand at great length on the relationship between the Lord and his servant. The prophet hopes to help us to focus on the things that matter the most in our relationship with God.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2008

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Seven: Comfort, Comfort My People (Isaiah 40:1-41:29)

Isaiah's focus now shifts from events in his own lifetime to ideas of a more timeless nature. As he delves into numerous aspects of the relationship that we can have with God, he continues to emphasize God as the only sound foundation for our lives. In these two chapters, he reminds us of God's transcendent nature and of the folly of putting our hope in the things of this world.

Review Of Recent Classes

For several chapters (Isaiah 28-35), the prophet contrasted those who trust in the things of this world with those who trust in God's grace and wisdom. After that (Isaiah 36-39), he described several historical events in which king Hezekiah and the prophet himself both played a part. These incidents and situations illustrate some of the principles that Isaiah spoke of earlier. For example, when Assyria besieged Jerusalem in 701 BC, the city was saved not by the works of Hezekiah or any other human, but only by "the zeal of the Lord Almighty" (36:1-37:38).

There are also some events of a more personal nature, which help us to see God's viewpoint on the things that occur "in the land of the living" (38:1-39:8), that is, on this earth. When Hezekiah is told by God that he will soon die, he prayerfully makes a personal request that God grants. We cannot know the exact reasons for God's decisions in this case, but we do not need to. Rather, as Hezekiah's subsequent prayer indicates, the point is to realize that our faith is much more important to God than anything else we can do or say in this life.

After his recovery, the king greets some guests from Babylon in an open-handed but ill-advised fashion. When Isaiah speaks to the king about the ways that careless actions can affect things in the future, Hezekiah accepts what Isaiah says, but he also takes some false comfort in knowing that no disasters will befall the nation in his own time.

Faithful but fallible, honest but often lacking in judgment, Hezekiah in many ways represents believers in general. While we may often wish to think of ourselves as spiritual 'warriors' or some other such silly thing, the truth is that none of us ever really stays on the right track for very long at all - and that is all right, because God does not need our grace and favor; we always need his. In the next section of the book* (Isaiah 40-49), Isaiah will provide us with further insights into the relationship between the Lord and his servant.

* Commentators usually view Isaiah 40 as bringing about a significant change of emphasis. To some degree this is warranted, because after this point the prophet largely leaves behind the events of his own era. But many commentators fail to appreciate the continuity of main themes throughout the book. Some 'modern' writers even claim that a different author wrote chapters 40-66. There are even those who like to say that there were three different 'Isaiahs' (seeing another division between chapters 55 and 56).

Prepare The Way For The Lord (Isaiah 40:1-11)

God desires nothing more than to comfort us in our distress, strengthen us in our weakness, and teach us in our confusion. But he can only do this if we prepare our hearts to receive him. If we can clear our minds of the world's lies and distractions, and if we can take the time to appreciate God's unlimited capacity for helping us, then we can enjoy the blessing of his presence.

Setting aside his concerns about specific problems in his own lifetime, Isaiah looks ahead to a time of redemption, when God can tell his people that their hard service is now completed, and their sin paid for (40:1-5). This is one of Isaiah's dual-level prophecies, looking ahead both to the return from Babylonian exile* and also to the time when Jesus the Messiah would once for all pay the penalty for the sins of the world.

* As Isaiah has alluded to earlier, Judah would be conquered, Jerusalem destroyed, and most of the people enslaved by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Soon after Babylon itself fell in 538 BC, the remnant of Judah was allowed to return home, in fulfillment of the literal level of Isaiah's 'remnant' prophecies.

In expressing God's desire to make a highway straight and smooth for his people, the prophet inter-connects several ideas. Isaiah has often mentioned the idea of a 'highway', a means of coming to God, both for those who belong to God and for those who want to come to God. For those in his own time, he spoke of God's will to provide a highway extending even to the likes of Egypt and Assyria, so that no one would be denied the chance to come to God. This promise of universal opportunity is a crucial aspect of the comfort that God offers.

We are most familiar with Isaiah 40:3 from its application to John the Baptist, as it is quoted in Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, and Luke 3:4-6 (which quotes all of Isaiah 40:3-5). God never intended either the old law or the physical nation of Israel to be the permanent way to him or the only way to him, because they were so imperfect. John's ministry proclaimed the final preparations that were then being made to provide perfect once-for-all cleansing of sins through the Messiah. God's highway is now open to all, and God's glory can be seen by all who look for it.

In contrast to the everlasting highway that God has laid for us to follow to him, all human-initiated activity is like the grass that withers, or the flowers that bloom for a time only to fall later (40:6-8). Human wisdom of all kinds has at best a limited and temporary value, because it is geared to achieving things within the short time that we live on this earth. Thus it always comes to nothing in the long run. Even human institutions that last for hundreds of years can never outlast the ultimate end of this world, an end that is certain, because God has said that it is.

But the Word and will of our God will stand forever. And if his Word and will stand forever, then also his compassion, his mercy, and his majesty will stand forever. Unlike the authorities and experts of this world, who can promise us little in this life and nothing in the next, God can guarantee all of his promises, because he will always be alive, and he will always be God. Jesus likewise will always be there to provide the grace that believers so desperately need, "because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

The combination of God's power and God's tenderness (40:9-11) can be hard to grasp, but it is an essential aspect of his nature, and thus of our relationship with him. So, Isaiah encourages us to accept and praise God as he truly is, not as we wish him to be and not as we might be if we were God. He calls us not to be ashamed or reluctant to proclaim God in all his truth, but to call out eagerly, in words that give comfort to the soul, "here is your God!"

Thus the prophet says that "his reward is with him", for God himself is the reward for our faith. His wisdom and his compassion enable him to meet all of our truest needs. He does not always give us the things that we think we need, but instead the things that meet our real needs, the needs that can never be filled by the world.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kind of comfort does God bring to his people? In Isaiah's time, how did God want to make the 'highway' straight? How does he make it straight for us? What qualities of God does Isaiah call us to accept and to proclaim?

To Whom Will You Compare Me? (Isaiah 40:12-31)

Since God's full nature is far greater than anything that we can see or imagine in this world, we often shy away from trying to understand it better. We can perhaps find a sense of false comfort and security by 'believing in' the kind of 'god' who concerns himself with the same things that consume our attention. But genuine faith comes only from seeking a living, transcendent God.

As basic as the idea is, Isaiah reminds us at length that God is not of this world (40:12-26). When he asks questions like, "who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?", these are in part rhetorical, since the answer is clear at once. But it bears thinking about, for we can easily forget that God lives beyond our entire universe, and that his nature is beyond our power fully to comprehend or even describe. Indeed, to God all the nations of the earth, or for that matter all the galaxies in the universe, are no weightier than dust on a scales.

Contrast this with the idols in which humans so often put their hope. As Isaiah will detail later at greater length (*e.g.* chapter 41 and chapter 44), idols are merely false 'gods' created in our image, rather than the other way around. Every idol - whether the metal and stone kind that Isaiah often faced, or the variety of idols so popular in our own society - needs its human worshipers not only to create it, but also to sustain it. How different from the living God!

God is not just a powerful force on our earth; he is above and beyond the earth and its rulers. He is not just very large, but is beyond our physical dimensions. He calls the stars by name, and he knows our every thought and action. Yet even statements such as these can communicate only a small portion of God's full majesty and transcendence. If our "knowledge" of God makes us feel more intelligent than or morally superior to others, then we have no true knowledge of God. Every true glimpse of God or of his nature produces one response: a humble plea for his grace.

Contrary to what we often might feel, God does know everything (40:27-31). Neither our ways nor our needs nor our sins are hidden. It is foolish to think that he does not know what we are doing, it is foolish to think that he does not know what we are suffering, and it is foolish to think that he does not know what we are thinking.

To those who are proud, he offers humbling, but to those who are weary, he gives strength and comfort. The beautiful poetic images in verse 31 can provide us with hope whether our weariness is of the body, the mind, or the soul.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What other Scriptures contain imagery similar to that in verses 12-14 and 20-24? What are these meant to teach us? Why is it hard for us to understand how far beyond us God is? How can we gain more understanding of God?

To Prop Up Or To Topple (Isaiah 41:1-29)

Things other than God from which we expect what God should supply (such as security, purpose, significance, or hope) can become idols. The flesh loves idols, because they seem to promise results we desire without the humility that it takes to seek and understand God. So, we have two choices: we can prop up and defend our idols, or we can expose them and topple them.

God's offer "let us meet together" (41:1-7) returns us to his plea in Isaiah 1:18. But now Isaiah has demonstrated at length that God has proven his power and his wisdom. God has proven his transcendence, while earthly leaders and experts have repeatedly shown their inability to deal with the most important questions of our existence, especially that of death.

God once more reminds us that he knows all the answers, while the world doesn't even know enough to ask the right questions. All we need to do is to come to him in humility and sincerity. Only pride stops us from doing this, but it is the sad truth that many persons would rather hold onto their pride. It is because of this that humans are always so determined to make idols.

The desperation of the idolatrous may not always be obvious, but it is only thinly hidden. Isaiah once more reminds us that an idol's own worshipers have to work to keep it from toppling over. Those who worship money have to keep gaining more, for no amount of money can ever bring lasting security. Those who worship a human being (whether a celebrity, a leader, an athlete, or anything else) have to defend their hero or heroine's most obvious flaws and sins, to maintain the pretense of their idol's perfection. When we give in to such things, it should serve as a warning.

You and I were created to be servants of God (41:8-20), not of idols or of any earthly things. Humans choose their idols, but God has chosen us. And he has not rejected those whom he has chosen; in fact, the only way not to belong to God is to choose not to do so. God will not forsake us: he will not withdraw his offer of grace, and he will not turn away anyone who responds to it.

With this in mind, the prophet exposes idols and idolaters for the silly things they are* (41:21-29). In a rhetorical combination of sarcasm and confrontation, he challenges us all to "bring in your idols", and see how they look in comparison with God. Indeed, we Christians can be as bad as pagans when it comes to putting our faith and hope in worldly things, because it seems so much easier than putting our hope in God alone.

* In chapter 44, Isaiah will have some insights into how and why we create idols. In this present chapter, he is primarily interested in pointing out that they cannot deliver anything of genuine or lasting value.

Human idols ranging from successful athletes to popular entertainers to powerful politicians to wealthy businessmen all receive great attention and admiration here on earth, but if you put them next to God, then they all look like fools, slackers, or worse. Common desires such as material things, popularity, fame, and sensual enjoyment may seem wonderful to the flesh, but if you put them next to an eternity of peace, joy, and security, then they look shabby and pointless.

Used properly, some of these things are harmless or even mildly helpful in the right situations. But when our gullibility or short-sighted perspective turns them into idols, they not only lose whatever minimal value they may have had, but they can even become dangerous to our spiritual health. Expose your idols and topple them now, before God has to do it for you.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does God mean in inviting us to meet together (or reason together)? What should our response be? Why does God not forsake us even when we act faithlessly? What kinds of things do we allow to become idols? How can we tell what our idols are? How does Isaiah help us put them in the proper perspective?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2008
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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Eight: Here Is My Servant (Isaiah 42:1-17)

The idea of 'the servant' is one of the major themes in Isaiah, especially in the later part of the book. This passage looks at the ideal of a godly servant, a concept that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. The servant of God is called to live a life that truly reflects the things that God himself values, and to adopt a viewpoint very different from that of the worldly.

Review

Isaiah 28-35 examines the contrast between trusting in the things of this world and trusting in God. Then (Isaiah 36-39), the prophet recounts several incidents involving himself and King Hezekiah, to illustrate some of these same principles. Isaiah serves as the one who proclaims God's Word, while Hezekiah is fallible yet always quick to listen to God. Their interactions illustrate on a small level the next main topic of the book, the relationship between the Lord and his servant (Isaiah 40-49).

When God calls out "comfort, comfort my people" (40:1-41:29), he offers true, lasting comfort, not the false comfort offered by the world. He prepares the way for us to come to him, and he smooths out the highway. This passage refers to the future return from Babylonian exile, and also to its ultimate fulfillment in John the Baptist, who heralded the coming of the Messiah Jesus.

Isaiah also continues to emphasize the foolish nature of seeking idols or earthly things instead of God. God asks rhetorically, "to whom will you compare me?", and he challenges idolaters to see how their idols stack up against him. Not only do idols (both then and now) need to be created by their own worshipers, but they also must continually be propped up to keep them from falling. When we, by the grace of God, have our idols exposed, we ought simply to let them topple over.

God's Chosen One (Isaiah 42:1-7)

This portrait of God's servant reminds us how different God's viewpoint is from that of the world. The things God most looks for in his servant are not talent, ambition, self-confidence, or other qualities that bring success in earthly matters. God's servant is above all humble before God and understanding of others. Jesus*, our perfect example, calls us to walk in his steps.

This passage is quoted of Jesus in Matthew 12:18-21.

The nature of God's servant emphasizes what matters to God (42:1-4), even if it is not considered valuable by those around us. To know that God already has chosen us (compare 41:8-9) can wound the pride of the self-important, since they cannot be in control. Yet it is encouraging to the humble, for we know that we do not have to impress God or persuade him to accept us; he already wants us to know him, and we are a delight to God when we respond to him. We often become so accustomed to the competitive nature of this world that we tend not to appreciate things that are freely available to all - yet these are usually the best and most important things.

The Lord's servant is characterized by gentleness and a sense of justice*, and these things show in the ways that he or she treats others. Isaiah uses analogies such as a smoldering wick** to describe the kinds of challenges that God's servants will meet. The image depicts the servant gently reviving a flickering candlestick, instead of snuffing it out in annoyance. Likewise, God hopes that his servants will deal gently and patiently with those who need grace and mercy.

* As Isaiah's messages have previously illustrated, this concern for justice is not the negative, punishment-oriented kind of 'justice' that is impressed upon our minds by our nation's medieval legal system. To the prophet (and the servant), justice is a positive concept, the desire to see that everyone has a fair chance at the things that matter.

** Isaiah's other analogy here is similar in meaning. Those who needed assistance walking, and who were unable to obtain a sturdy walking stick, would often use a type of stiff reed that was common in the area. But these reeds would soon start to crack, making them of little use for support. The expression 'a broken reed' was a thus common way of referring to someone weak or unhelpful. Note the use of this expression by the Assyrians in 2 Kings 18:21 and Isaiah 36:6.

Then too, the servant will not falter or be discouraged, either in ministering to others or in faithfulness to God. There is, of course, nothing wrong with having feelings of dismay, disappointment, or hurt. Indeed, one would have to be brutally de-sensitized to human suffering never to feel such things in this world. But Isaiah means that we ought never to allow this world's pains and tragedies to cause us to waver in our devotion to the truth. The more we are aware of the bad things in this life, and the more we agonize over them, the more firmly we should devote ourselves to God. Once again, Jesus is our perfect example in this.

The calling of God's servant also reflects God's priorities (42:5-7). Just as God gave life and breath to humanity in the beginning, so now it is his voice and his breath (see also the questions below) that call the servant to follow him. It is not our will for our lives that ultimately determines our purpose, but it is God's will that determines the path on which we should go. And his path, the highway, always leads to the truth.

The Lord's servant is then called to be a covenant and a light. We have a covenant with God, promising our salvation and redemption, and our faith is a covenant with him. Our faith upholds the justness of his covenant, as a testimony of God's righteousness. His truth upholds the certainty of his covenant, as a testimony of our eternal security. In so doing, we also become a light to the world around us, showing the way to the truth and convicting the world of its need for God. Believers in Jesus who live what they believe are a source of light in a dark world.

As Isaiah has so often stressed, the servant's ministry is to the blind and captive, not the strong and powerful. God's servant ministers not only to the literally blind or captive or ill, but rather to all those who are blinded by the world's lies or who are captive to sin. This includes, of course, everyone, though not all realize it. Like Jesus himself, the Lord's servant is to help those who know their need, and who humbly desire to know their God.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why are the qualities Isaiah mentions here so important for the Lord's servant to have? How do they relate to the qualities of God himself? Why does God emphasize the act of breathing in passages like Isaiah 42:5, Genesis 2:7, and 2 Timothy 3:16? How can we be a covenant? How can we be a light?

Sing To The Lord A New Song (Isaiah 42:8-17)

The evocative exhortation in verse 10 is no less than a call to rise above all of this world's distractions and discouragements, so that we can see matters from a more godly perspective. Since God sees things differently and values things differently, his servant can understand God's ways only by listening for God's voice amidst the pointless chattering of the worldly.

God speaks through the prophet to say, "new things I declare" (42:8-13), for it has always been God's intent to redeem believers from this perishable, sin-flawed world, and ultimately to provide them with a new home. In all this, the glory belongs to God, and this is the new song that we sing. In a world that promises much but delivers nothing of lasting value, in God and in Jesus we have found the one source of hope and truth.

Everyone wants to be able to engage in praise and rejoicing, for even the worldly find things to rhapsodize about. The issue is not whether we praise and rejoice, but whether we are praising the right God and rejoicing for the right reasons. Evil persons rejoice, but for the wrong reasons. The ungodly praise other humans, wealth, or sensual pleasure, but such praise is misdirected.

The God who has created so many things with the capacity to give us enjoyment, not the things themselves, should be given the praise. And if he can create things that bring earthly delight to such benighted and benumbed creatures as we are, then he can prepare an eternal spiritual paradise that is beyond our present ability to describe.

God's patience is extraordinary, yet there comes a time when he remains silent no longer (42:14-17). He compares his patient forbearance of sin and folly to a woman in the pains of childbirth*, going through an ordeal in the hope that new life will come of it. This also helps explain why God now speaks as he does.

* Compare this with New Testament passages such as John 16:20-22 and Galatians 4:19-20.

To the blind (*i.e.* to those who know they are blind) he promises to bring light; it is for the sake of the humble that he endures those who do not admit they are blind. But to idol worshipers he will bring only shame, and a darkness even greater than that in which they live already. For they have rejected his patience and compassion in order to worship pointless and useless things, which can never give life. In giving them nothing, God only gives them what they asked for.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What are the 'new things' God speaks of here? Why is the song we sing 'new'? Can we know when we are praising and rejoicing for the right reasons? Why is childbirth used as an analogy here? In what sense does God give light to the spiritually blind?

Looking Ahead

As we continue in this section of Isaiah, it is helpful to keep in mind the identity or identities of the servant. Jesus is, of course, the perfect servant, and most of Isaiah's 'servant' passages refer at

least in part (or on one level) to Jesus*. So it is often helpful to see how the prophet's descriptions of the servant apply to Jesus, and how the servant exemplifies Jesus' ministry.

* Notice, however, that passages such as Isaiah 42:19-20 could not possibly refer to Jesus, and in other passages like Isaiah 44:1-2 and 44:21, the emphasis is clearly on human servants. Then, on the other hand, in places like Isaiah 52:13 and 53:13 the prophet is obviously talking foremost about the Messiah. See also the questions below.

The 'servant' often represents believers, both in Isaiah's day and now. For believers in Isaiah's day, the Lord's servant represented the call to remain faithful despite the faithlessness of so many Israelites. Believers in Isaiah's day also needed to be aware that their era represented just one stage in the unfolding of God's Messianic ministry. Many of Isaiah's original listeners would have children or grand-children who would be taken captive to Babylon, but they could also know that a later generation would return to Judah, spiritually stronger and ready to be more devoted servants.

Believers today have the great benefit of seeing the Messianic ministry in its completed entirety. We are able to enjoy its spiritual benefits in part because other generations long ago endured discipline and hardship. Thus we have even more reason to emulate the kind of servant that Isaiah describes. Note also that, in any time frame, the 'servant' might represent individual believers, believers as a group (the church, or the nation of Judah), or both.

The theme of the Lord and his servant will also be at the center of the next several chapters. Isaiah will discuss the redemption of the servant (Isaiah 42:18-44:5), to remind us of our complete dependence on God's grace. He will reproach the idolatrous and call us to acknowledge that for the Lord's servant there is no other God but the one living God (Isaiah 44:6-45:25), so that we must expose and renounce our idols.

The servant should remember that God's purpose will stand (Isaiah 46:1-47:15), both against physical attacks from Babylon and other forces, and also from the spiritual attacks of the ungodly. Through it all, the servant can and should be a light for the Gentiles - that is, for unbelievers (Isaiah 48:1-49:26). Those who know and seek God have the only true light that this world will see, and God hopes that we shall let that light shine.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah use the term 'servant' in so many ways? Should we always determine one meaning for it in any given passage? Select some of the 'servant' passages in Isaiah 40-66, and see if you can tell whether they apply to Jesus, believers in Isaiah's day, believers today, or more than one of these.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2008

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Nine: The Redemption Of The Servant (Isaiah 42:18-44:5)

Isaiah has described for us the ideal servant of the Lord, but he is well aware that only the Messiah himself will fulfill this perfect depiction. God knows that even faithful servants will always need his grace and redemption. Before we can hope to understand the true nature of God and of God's will, we first must accept how completely dependent we are on him.

Review Of Recent Classes

In this section of the book (Isaiah 40-49), the prophet talks about one of his key themes, the relationship between the Lord and his servant. God calls out to "comfort, comfort my people" (40:1-41:29), as he looks ahead to the future. Although he will later send Judah into exile, he will also arrange for their return*. These verses are even more significant in foretelling the ministry of John the Baptist, which in turn helped prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah.

* All of these events took place after Isaiah's lifetime, but he foretold the entire sequence of events in his prophecies. Besides previous notes, see also the notes below to Isaiah 43:14-21.

God's proclamation, "here is my servant" (42:1-17) leads into a characterization of the ideal follower of God. These qualities are most fully realized in Jesus, and they are also the things God wants to find in all of his servants. The nature of the servant is to value gentleness, justice, and perseverance. The calling of the servant is to be a light and a covenant for others to see.

The servant can also sing "a new song" to the Lord, for the old values and perspectives are left behind when we are able to see God as he is. The servant of God no longer follows idols, and gives glory only to God. The servant does not by himself or herself decide what is true or right, but rather seeks out the path, the highway, that God has already prepared and made smooth.

The Servant's Spiritual Struggle (Isaiah 42:18-25)

As long as we live in the flesh, we shall struggle against sin, weakness, and folly. God's servants face the same problems as everyone else, with the only difference being that they know where to turn for grace and mercy. There is no need for believers to hide their faults - indeed, those who understand grace realize that God asks only that we humbly acknowledge our need for him.

The problem of spiritual blindness and deafness has arisen before in the course of Isaiah's ministry (42:18-22), since it was a common and persistent problem he faced. His plea, "you have seen many things, but have paid no attention" echoes other things Isaiah has proclaimed during his ministry, all the way back to God's warning that the people he faced would be "ever hearing, but never understanding" (Isaiah 6:9). Such problems were also quite familiar to Jesus*.

* Isaiah 6:9-10 is quoted in Matthew 13:14-15, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10, John 12:40, and Acts 28:26-27.

Such difficulties can discourage faithful believers who cannot help but notice how little the world truly understands about God. That is why Isaiah reminds us that God proclaims and explains his will for the sake of his own righteousness - that is, because he knows that he alone is truly righteous, and that humans can never arrive at the truth solely through their own efforts.

In this world, we each become lost quite quickly when we try to tackle things alone. The distractions and temptations of the world are stronger than our will, and Satan is far stronger than we ever shall be. Indeed, when humans persuade themselves that they are following their own will, and that they are the ones making the decisions in their lives, this merely indicates just how enslaved they really are to fleshly desires. There is no one on this earth who can rescue us from its greatest dangers; only God is a true Savior and a true Lord.

So, which of us (or which of you, as the prophet says) will choose to listen to God? (42:23-25). That has always been God's question. He cares not whether human governments choose to implement superficial aspects of his laws, and he cares not whether popular culture acknowledges his glory. Governments and other human institutions can never produce, enact, or purchase the things that God actually desires, and we simply delude ourselves when we look to these pagan institutions for spiritual comfort or hope.

It is God's ways that we should seek, and God's will and law that we should learn and follow. We should neither ask for nor expect help from pagans in our spiritual struggle. Nor should we waste time lamenting over the symptoms of the world's lost condition, but instead should at all times remind ourselves of their real problems and their real needs. It is also God's discipline - not ours, not a government's, and not an expert's - that will deal with spiritual disorders that truly must be corrected now. Those with faith will rejoice in allowing God to reign in all these things.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How can God's own servant be blind and deaf? Why is this such a persistent problem? Find where passages like these are quoted in the New Testament. What common themes are there? What can we learn from this passage about the way God uses his discipline?

Precious In His Sight (Isaiah 43:1-13)

Those who willingly choose to become servants of God are a delight to him, and are precious in his sight. God's presence is always with his servants, even in the most dire or extreme situations. We, in return, are witnesses to God's righteousness and wisdom, by the faith we place in him. Our hope and confidence are in him, not in ourselves, and thus our hope can always be sure.

God says to his remnant, "fear not, for I have redeemed you" (43:1-7). God does not promise that we shall not face trouble, but rather that he will always be with us, at all times and in every circumstance. Isaiah's imagery of passing safely through water and fire is not literal, but it is still a great encouragement. God may well ask us to pass through something unpleasant, and may even allow some outward harm to occur at the hands of a cruel and unbelieving world. But he will never permit us to undergo any spiritual trial that we cannot get through safely.

God has also willed to gather together his servants (the remnant). This pleases to God in itself, and it also provides a source of strength and encouragement to those who are part of the remnant. God has always known - and we cannot change the fact - that the vast majority of persons he created will travel along the 'broad road' to spiritual death. That means that those who seek the 'narrow' road to life will do well to seek each other out, to travel together on God's highway.

Yet Isaiah hardly means for us to withdraw from the world, for God says to us, "you are my witnesses" (43:8-13). This refers to something much more important than verbal assertions of

belief or invitations to church functions. He is, instead, describing how our entire lives and even our souls can be a testimony to God's righteousness and justice.

All humans are, in actuality, witnesses to the type of life and perspectives that they have chosen. The materialistic are witnesses to the things that materialism produces. The hedonistic are witnesses to the ways that pleasure-seeking affects one's life. Those who desire power are witnesses to the effects of egomania and selfish ambition. And we, as believers, are witnesses to the effects that belief has - or does not have - on our lives.

No one but God could have known, or can know, all the things that have taken place in this world. It is not possible for even the wisest or best-educated human to see into the future in any detail at all. As Christians, we are no different in that respect*, but instead we know that we can have complete faith in God's guidance us through anything and everything that happens. Even when we do talk to others about God, what God desires is for us to testify for him naturally, as the result of a love and appreciation for him, not as a planned method or program.

* Since the time of Jesus, God has revealed next to nothing in terms of the details of what will happen in the future, even as it applies to the end of this physical world. It is a misconception to think that we can figure out the 'end times' or other world events. What God wants now is, instead, our faith in his ability to work in any and all circumstances, and our faith in his ultimate victory.

Our witness, then, is to the wisdom and the inevitability of God's will. This does not mean that every person will act as God wishes him or her to do, but rather that those who follow him will receive the things he has promised them, no matter what those who oppose God may try to do. Nor should we expect God to bless us all the time, so that others view Christianity as a means to earthly prosperity. We instead should show them that faith allows us to accept both good and bad things, in the knowledge that there is greater, eternal reality ahead of us.

So, the question for us is, do we believe all this? If so, then it cannot help but affect our thinking, our words, and our actions. If we do not, then we should spend more time with God, so that we can learn to believe it. Otherwise, any witness that we may offer to the world will merely be a testimony to church activities or to personal desires, not on behalf of God himself.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kind of confidence and fearlessness does God want believers to have? What practical situations would parallel Isaiah's images of passing through fire or water? In what ways or on what occasions do our lives give witness to others? Is this something that we should consciously think about?

Belonging To The Lord (Isaiah 43:14-44:5)

The servant has been called to belong to God, not simply to follow God or even to serve God. To belong to God is both a blessing and a responsibility. The Lord's servant knows that he or she has been chosen, so that to belong to God means no less than to fulfill the purpose of one's life. These truths have many significant implications, as Isaiah now details.

God has always desired to clear the way (43:14-21), to create the highway to him that Isaiah has so often spoken of. Here, he combines a promise for the future with a reminder of the past. Concerning the future, Isaiah again openly speaks of the return from exile that will begin after a period of Babylonian captivity, which itself will happen only after Isaiah's lifetime*. Though

(then) well in the future, it was important even to Isaiah's original audience, for God wanted them to understand that events in their lifetimes would have an impact far into the future.

* As was noted earlier, Babylon would invade Judah in 606 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC. In the last invasion, they would destroy Jerusalem and enslave most of its people. Shortly after the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon itself in 538 BC, Cyrus the Great of Persia decreed that the Jews could start returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding it, a process described in Ezra and Nehemiah.

The reminder of times in the past when God delivered his people is accompanied with the appeal to "forget the former things; do not dwell on the past" (verse 18). This is not a contradiction, but an insight into human nature. We invariably tend either to dwell on the past (making superficial or emotional comparisons between present-day experiences and the past), or to reject the past as irrelevant. Both are foolish attitudes.

God says that he has chosen to do 'a new thing' (verse 19), not to be compared with the old, but to replace the old. But we are to remember his faithfulness from the past, so that we can put our trust in him in the present and in the future.

Despite all the assurances from both past and present, God reproaches his people that, "you have not called upon me" (43:22-28). Although they would be quick to identify themselves as 'God's people', their lackadaisical 'worship' and worldly perspectives bear witness (compare with verses 10-12 above) that they have no real faith in God and no genuine relationship with him.

Because of God's own patience and reason, though, they will always have the highway to truth and repentance open to them. We, just like they did, tend to look at God's patient forbearance and mistakenly conclude that we have a privileged position that has motivated him to bless us. We should always watch ourselves so that we do not mistake God's nature for our goodness.

What God really offers is not rewards for the spiritually wonderful, but water for the thirsty land (44:1-5). He seeks not those who do great deeds for him, but those who acknowledge their great need for him. Once again the prophet looks back to the time each of his people* was created, and then looks ahead, showing how our lives to God are always part of a more glorious whole.

* 'Jeshurun', which Isaiah uses in verse 2, is a poetic name for Israel. Literally, it means 'upright one'.

Thus Isaiah adds more promises for the future, in spite of all the faithlessness and sin that he has described. Even the times of discipline will be the prelude to blessing later. And most importantly, the spiritual blessings that God is preparing will be enjoyed for many generations after the prophet and his original hearers have passed from the earth.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In Isaiah's time, how had God cleared the way for his people? How would he do so later? How has he done so for us? How should we view what God has done for us in the past? Why did God tell Isaiah's generation that they had not called on him? How might we do the same thing? How do we benefit from the promises in 44:1-5?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2008
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**THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49**

Notes For Week Ten: There Is No Other God (Isaiah 44:6-45:25)

Idolatry was one of the root causes behind many of the spiritual problems in Judah during Isaiah's ministry. Today, too, it is the source of many of the ills in the lives and ministries of believers. The only real difference is that today's most popular idols are usually not made out of wood or clay or stone, and so it can be a bit harder for us to recognize them and deal with them.

Review Of Recent Classes

One of the major themes in Isaiah, given particular emphasis in this section (Isaiah 40-49), is the relationship between the Lord and his servant. As the prophet sees God's plans for the future, he calls out to "comfort, comfort my people" (40:1-41:29), which looks ahead to the return from exile and also (or especially) the Messiah. Then God declares through the prophet, "here is my servant" (42:1-17), as he describes the nature and calling of the ideal servant of God.

Another important aspect of this relationship is the redemption of the servant (42:18-44:5). The servant should not be surprised by spiritual struggle, because even believers often fall into the world's mistake of seeing and hearing without understanding. Isaiah often describes this problem as spiritual blindness or spiritual deafness.

Yet believers are always precious in God's sight, not for what we do or accomplish, but for the faith we place in him. On this lost planet, we are witnesses that it is possible to seek and to trust God, despite all of this world's suffering, violence, and distractions. Belonging to the Lord brings with it spiritual responsibility, but it also means that we are assured of his presence always. At all times, we have him as a source of light and water in a dark and thirsty world.

The Prophet's Description Of Idol Worship (Isaiah 44:6-20)

As Isaiah describes the process by which idols are created, we can see both the folly of worshiping them and also the motivation behind them. To worship an idol essentially allows humans to worship themselves, under the convenient pretext of worshiping a 'god'. Yet human nature is such that idolaters usually end up being caught in a trap of their own making.

The prophet depicts God as issuing an open challenge to idols and to their creators (44:6-11). In actuality, the idols themselves are not the problem*, so the real challenge is to those who create and worship them. Isaiah has previously pointed out that God is the true Creator, and thus is superior to all idols. He now selects two additional grounds on which God is ready to be compared with any idol. Only God has shown his ability to know and to foreknow everything of importance; and only God is an eternal, unchangeable Rock who will always be there for us.

* This is true whether we apply it to the cast and carved idols of Isaiah's time, or to the things idolaters worship today. There is nothing inherently wrong with sculpture or woodworking, but it becomes a problem when someone exalts a physical object to the status of a 'god'. Likewise, many of the popular idols of today (examples below) can be relatively harmless if viewed properly. It is when we expect such things to 'change our lives' or to provide things like security, hope, or purpose that they become idols.

One of the world's hobbies is to predict things. Plenty of so-called experts earn a living from predicting everything from the weather to sports championships to political elections to the stock market. Most of them do no better than random guessing could have done, so they rely on slick

techniques or arbitrary credentials to retain their status. Even the few competent prognosticators can do only a bit better than the average person. God is not even comparable to such silliness.

Likewise, God's eternal, immortal status means that he, unlike a person or a human organization, will always be there to provide the things we count on - not just in this world, but also in eternity. He also will be the final judge of all that we have done, said, and believed. The world has a wide array of tactics for persuading us to accept the authority of those no better than ourselves, but in the end it matters little. Those who now presume to sit in judgment or to exercise authority will someday be confronted with God's true authority and his permanent judgment.

But idols (whether they are material, financial, human, or intangible) are merely the creations of human beings. For example, even the celebrity or hero status that is accorded to so many public figures is merely a creation of public opinion, playing upon common insecurities or ambitions, or perhaps on the desire to get something from such persons. Since idols are created things that were in turn created by beings who themselves were created, they are doubly inferior to God.

The prophet's description of an idolater's 'ministry' applies directly to idols of wood or stone (44:12-20), but the same principles can apply to the idols we ourselves worship. Notice the sacrifice of time, effort, and resources* that the idolater makes, thinking that this will make his idol more valuable. Persons today lavish their own resources on their careers, their possessions, their favorite celebrities, and the like, thinking that this gives value to these idols. In reality, it proves how foolish and pointless it is to give our hearts so fully to anything other than God.

* Note that merely putting time and effort into something does not mean that it is an idol. Many persons must spend a good deal of their lives on jobs or other responsibilities that they know to have low spiritual importance. The idolater's error is that he thinks that his time and effort can take something inherently unimportant and transform it into something of special value.

Isaiah then proceeds to point out some of the idolater's most obvious mistakes. These are easy to see in regards to someone making a 'god' out of a hand-crafted figurine, but it is more important to realize how closely they describe our own idol worship. Whether it involves bowing down to a bronze carp, sacrificing one's integrity or spiritual well-being to acquire material things, or gushing over the persona of a celebrity, most idol worship* generally involves these same errors.

* Worship is not limited to acts that we label 'worship' (nor is everything that we call 'worship' actually worship in any meaningful sense). Worship (and, for that matter, idolatry) is the kind of spiritual concept that cannot be adequately defined with a dictionary-style definition. But, at least in a general sense, worship refers to acts or attitudes that reveal our belief that the worshiped object is vital to our existence or our well-being, and/or that it can provide for our important needs.

Everything in the physical universe is made of common material, which someday will perish. This applies to human beings, organizations, governments, sports teams, material things, money, and much else besides. Neither tangible objects nor earthly accomplishments nor pleasures will last beyond this world. Thus none of them can ever hope to fulfill our spiritual needs.

Another central mistake of idol worship is that idolaters make a desperate, illogical plea (either explicitly or implicitly) to their idols. Humans worship idols because they expect to get something from them. We worship money because we think it brings security and happiness. We worship athletes and entertainers because we want to share in the glory of their successes. Such expectations, along with things that humans expect of their careers, political leaders, popularity, authority, or pleasure, are all either irrational, selfish, or both.

Acts of idolatry are willfully ignorant in many ways, but most of all in that they inevitably involve worship of self. The idolater chooses his or her 'gods', rather than accepting the God who actually lives. The idolater wants to 'be in control' rather than humbly to accept the will of a God that the idolater did not create. The idols we choose reveal what is important to us and what we most desire. If we value the right things and desire things that truly matter, then we shall be quite content to worship God alone. To worship anything other than God is idolatry*.

* Notice that it is inadequate to define an idol as "something we put ahead of God". God does not wish merely to be first on the list of our 'gods'. The main point of Isaiah's discussion is that God wishes to be the only object of our worship. There are many idols in our lives that are not 'ahead of God' in terms of our attention, but that nevertheless receive an inappropriate level of devotion or worship.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does it mean to worship an idol? Is this an idea that we can describe concisely? Did Isaiah have in mind the kinds of idols that are more common now? Identify some idols that you/we/others worship today. How do they illustrate the points Isaiah makes in this passage? How can this help to expose our idols?

The True Source Of Redemption & Salvation (Isaiah 44:21-45:8)

Unlike idols, God can give us the things that we need the most. He alone can redeem us and save us, and he alone can give us a worthwhile purpose in this world. This is because God made everything in our universe. No human or group of humans created or constructed the living God, and he towers above even the most prominent of humans and even the greatest of natural forces.

Isaiah asks idolaters why they will not simply return to God (44:21-28). God demands no explanations or defenses from those who return to him, even of idolaters. He graciously sweeps our sins away, in his joy that we have come to our senses. He asks only for us to acknowledge him as the one true God and Creator, and to accept his grace (*i.e.* by the power of Jesus' blood).

It is in this context that the prophet speaks at length about Cyrus of Persia, who in a future era will be the human instrument to bring about Judah's return from exile*. He refers to this powerful secular leader as the Lord's 'shepherd'. Cyrus is one of the most prominent figures in secular ancient history**, yet to God his only real significance was the way God would use him to bring about an event that was relatively minor from a secular perspective.

* As king of Persia, Cyrus led the coalition that overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 538 BC. Since Persian policy towards smaller nations was more benevolent than Babylon's, soon after taking Babylon's territories Cyrus allowed the captives to return to Judah. See 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4.

** Known to history as Cyrus 'The Great', he had also previously defeated the Median Empire (Media then became his ally against Babylon). He established the Persian (Achaemenid) Empire and the ruling dynasty of this empire. His generous treatment of smaller nations was not so much out of goodness as out of the realization that this could be more effective than intimidation as a way to build and maintain an empire.

Speaking to this future (from Isaiah's perspective) leader*, God promises, "I will go before you" (45:1-8); that is, all that Cyrus accomplishes will be by God's grace. Cyrus himself would naturally have found this either amusing or insulting, but it was God who would 'level the mountains' to make sure that this 'great' leader would be in the right place at the right time.

* Many commentators consider it impossible for Isaiah to have predicted Cyrus by name. They think that these verses are 'proof' that the Isaiah of the 8th century BC could not have written this part of the book.

God was not concerned about the other policies or accomplishments of Cyrus or his successors. Likewise, if he cares about today's issues or leaders, it is generally not in the ways that would

interest the world. Instead, he wishes for salvation to spring up (verse 8), and for the clouds to rain righteousness from above. This, too, is where he hopes his servants will learn to focus.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah keep reminding us that God created all things in our world? Why does he mention Cyrus of Persia so prominently? What do these things teach us about our own perspective?

Don't Quarrel With Your Maker (Isaiah 45:9-25)

Amongst other things, idolatry is unnecessary, for we already have a living God, our Creator, who is willing to save us. There is no good reason to challenge God or to compete with God, either directly or through idols. The more clearly that we are able to see God, the more willing we shall be to discard our idols, and to give up our attempts to substitute idols for God.

Isaiah uses the common biblical analogy of the potter and his clay (45:9-13) to emphasize the absurdity of worshiping idols. The proper form of worship is for the created beings to bow in humility before their Creator, but idolaters try to reverse this, and thus distort this relationship. As before, idolaters want to take control themselves, rather than letting God be in control.

The prophet also expresses God's disdain for human attempts to implement works salvation, which is an implicit feature of many idols and false religions. God promises to free the exiles, and to free all who are captive to sin, but "not for a price or a reward" (verse 13). No one paid or rewarded Jesus for dying on the cross. All of our attempts to earn or deserve salvation count for nothing at all with God. He forgives and blesses us because of his nature, not ours.

The truth has thus been made plain (45:14-25). God gives us all that we need in order to seek him, and instead we turn to cheap, perishable idols. Yet God knew the struggles we would have in turning to him. This earth was formed to be inhabited by thinking beings. God wishes not only for us to see his greatness and brilliance, but also to see his grace and compassion. The only way to do this is for him to allow each of us to have the free choice of whether to seek him.

In the Lord alone are to be found the things we most truly need. All of the things that we hope to receive from idols are just a substitute for our real needs. Our surface desires merely reflect our deeper needs, and these deeper needs all reflect our innate need for God.

Thus the most significant application of these chapters is Isaiah's implicit exhortation for us to expose the idols in our lives. To do so is not easy or pleasant, but it will bring us spiritual rewards that will last much longer than any idol will.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What other Scriptures use the analogy of a potter and his clay? What common lessons do they hold? How does the prophet use the analogy here? Why is it significant that God accepts no price or reward for redeeming us? What motivations does Isaiah give us for confronting and exposing our idols? How can we recognize them? What further steps could we then make?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, August 2008

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Eleven: My Purpose Will Stand (Isaiah 46:1-47:15)

Humans have always persisted in worshipping idols, and they will continue to do so as long as this earth exists. But God alone reigns, and God alone will judge, despite the world's efforts to install its idols in his place. While it can be difficult for us to cast off our idols, when we do so it allows us to see, understand, and appreciate God much more clearly.

Review

Much of this section of the book (Isaiah 40-49) centers on the relationship between the Lord and his servant. God desires to comfort his people, especially in their souls. He wishes to present his servants to the world as a light and as a living covenant. As Isaiah has often told us, God wishes to redeem his servants from this lost world, and to draw them together as a remnant.

God calls us to accept that there truly is no other God (Isaiah 44:6-45:25), so he calls us to expose and discard all idols. The prophet's description of idol worship applies to the physical idols of his own era and to the less obvious idols that are popular now. In God's challenge to idolaters, he points out that he is the Creator, whereas idols are created; that he alone knows and foreknows all things; and that only he will live forever to help those who worship him.

In describing an idolater's 'ministry', Isaiah points out some things to help us to expose our own idols for what they are. The idolater erroneously thinks that his time and effort can transform common material into a 'god'. Idolaters also make a desperate plea to their idols, asking the idols to save them and make their life meaningful, instead of asking God for these things. Idolatry is an act of willful ignorance that ultimately involves worshiping self. Idolaters wish to seize control by choosing and worshiping their own 'gods', rather than accepting the living God.

They do this because they value the temporary things of this world more than they value God's spiritual blessings. But only God is the true source of redemption and salvation. Only he can give true purpose to our lives, only he can meet our deepest needs, and only he will always be there to protect us, even when this life is over. Isaiah says that even Cyrus of Persia, the greatest secular ruler of his time, was to God a mere tool, and was completely dependent on God.

We, then, should not quarrel with our Maker by setting up idols in our hearts. As the prophet illustrates with the common biblical analogy of the potter and the clay, believers should be content to see God's will done - and they should take care to distinguish his will from theirs. We cannot choose our Creator, but we can choose to love him and to appreciate his blessings.

From Beginning To End (Isaiah 46:1-13)

The idols that humans worship are a terrible weight that wearies the soul, blocks the light, and torments the heart. It is only our pride and our inertia that prevent us from taking the initiative against our accumulated pantheon of idols. Through Isaiah, God appeals to us, urging us to see how unnecessary it is to live in idolatry. For God is always ready to give us what we truly need.

Idols are a heavy burden, but they are an entirely avoidable burden (46:1-7). Isaiah's description of idol worshipers laboriously dragging around their idols* is quite humorous in its way, yet it reveals an important truth about idols. Even if they are not made of heavy material like stone or metal, our own idols are also a dead weight, needlessly consuming our energy and our time.

* Isaiah specifically mentions the names of Bel and Nebo. 'Bel' is an ancient Semitic title, meaning lord or master (note its similarity to Baal), and the name was used at one time or another to refer to a number of different pagan 'gods'. During Isaiah's lifetime, it most commonly referred to Marduk, the supreme 'god' of Babylon. 'Nebo' is another name for Nabu, who was Marduk's son in Babylonian mythology.

When we place too high a value on the temporary things of this world, we risk going through this same kind of painstaking process, to keep our idols propped up and to try to obtain the rewards we seek from them. We then constantly rationalize the shortcomings of our idols, and can deliberately ignore any indications that they might not bring the lasting blessings we seek from them. Just as these poor, foolish idolaters (in Isaiah's description) should simply have left their idol behind to take care of itself, so also we should let go of our burdensome idols.

Idols distort our perspective. Once an idol takes root in our hearts, we no longer think of it objectively. When we put hope in an idol, and our hope is frustrated, we can end up blaming others instead of accepting that the idol did not deserve our devotion to begin with. When others do not accept our idol, or do not think as highly of it as we think they should, we may start finding fault with them, because we cannot see our idol in objective terms.

God is different, because God sustains us, rather than the other way around. God does not need our sacrifices, and he asks us to sacrifice very little - and that only for our own spiritual benefit. God does not need our approval, but he enjoys it, so he tolerates disdain from the vast majority of humans just because the few who sincerely praise him mean so much to him. God's majesty and immortality do not depend on our money, our actions, our votes, our knowledge, or anything else that we supply.

On the contrary, God supplies what we very much need, and he does this in so many ways that we invariably take them for granted. We depend on God every moment of every day, both to continue to supply our physical needs, and also to provide the grace and mercy that we constantly need. Contrast this with our idols - whether human, material, or intangible - that constantly need us to prop them up, or else they lose their exalted status.

Moreover, God promises us eternal rewards, and his salvation will not be delayed (46:8-13). He does not promise mere earthly rewards the way our idols do. Even when our idols actually provide us with some of the benefits they promise, they never last. There is none other like God, for no idol compares with him, neither in promising things of real value nor in the certainty that we shall receive what he promises.

And, unlike idols, it is God's main desire to bless us. He comes to us only to bring us salvation, righteousness, and splendor; he comes to bring us blessings that we cannot afford and can never earn. He needs nothing in return, and he desires only faith in return. He is not like our idols, which require us to give them power, money, and privilege in return for their vague and unreliable promises of blessings, which in turn usually end up being trivial in nature.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does Isaiah want us to learn from his description of the idolaters lugging their idol around? Review the things that are worshiped as idols today. What burdens do each of them place upon us? Are they physical burdens, spiritual, or both? How can we learn to see this more clearly? What new contrasts between God and idols does Isaiah give us in this passage? How can they help us to turn aside from our idols?

Warning Against False Security (Isaiah 47:1-15)

In Isaiah's lifetime, both Babylon and Judah suffered from the delusion of false security. The Babylonians felt that their size and strength would always keep them safe, while the residents of Judah felt certain that "their" God would never allow anything bad to happen to them. Today, though our reasoning may on the surface be different, we can easily fall into this same delusion.

Isaiah personally experienced one of the major disappointments that God has always faced in his relationship with his people: despite proclaiming the truth, no one will listen (47:1-7). While this passage is especially directed at the Babylonians, there is also a deliberate parallel between unbelieving Babylon and believing Judah. Both of them were guilty of disregarding God, and of valuing short-lived earthly blessings above deeper and more lasting needs.

The prophet thus depicts Babylon as a forlorn woman who has lost all her earthly security, and who must wander aimlessly in misery and shame. God would, in time, bring about such a fate in a literal fashion, first for Judah and later for Babylon. Yet the point is that this physical deprivation parallels the spiritual desolation that God already sees in both Judah and Babylon.

Thus Isaiah also stresses the need for spiritual reflection. From our perspective, as believers, it is easy for us to assume that the good things we have are proof of God's approval of us, rather than an expression of his grace and compassion upon the erring. When believers in God begin to think that they have arrived at maturity, and that they no longer need to ask questions or to re-evaluate their beliefs and perspectives, then this kind of spiritual dullness can set in quickly.

The prophet also warns against hidden weaknesses and misconceptions (47:8-15). Any form of earthly security is at best fragile and short-lived. We tend to take for granted things as they are, so that we are more likely to lament something we lose than to give thanks for what we have. Because it is frightening to realize just how vulnerable we are in earthly terms, even believers often put confidence in the wrong things.

The Babylonians thought that they had prosperity and safety because their astrologers and sorcerers* were doing a good job, and we also can give credit to ourselves, to our government, or to our culture for things that God has given us by his grace. It is easy to misunderstand God's patience, but he will someday call us all to account, and we cannot determine when that will be. It is human nature to wait until there is no choice before making unpleasant changes, but God's servants should not allow themselves to fall into this worldly habit.

* These were not the kinds of comical 'astrologers' that we encounter in our own time (though there are many who take even these fakes seriously). Babylonian astrologers and sorcerers combined the best scientific knowledge of the time with their own tactics of showmanship and self-promotion, and they attained positions of considerable influence. They were similar, in certain respects, to many of today's media figures or public opinion experts.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does Isaiah convey with his image of the desolate, wandering woman? To whom does this apply? What kinds of consideration or reflection (verse 7) does God want? What parallels are there today to the Babylonians' confidence in their astrologers and sorcerers? Are these idols, or an aspect of worshiping other idols? What is the right way to understand and respond to God's patience?

Summary & Preview

This section of Isaiah is a transition from the theme of the middle of the book, that God is "the sure foundation for your times", to the theme of the last portion, God's appeal for us to "rise, shine, for your light has come". Before we can fully understand or embrace what he calls us to, and before we can be the servants he seeks, we must expose, confront, and topple our idols.

Next (Isaiah 48), the prophet will urge us to choose God's peace instead of the false hope offered by our idols. Although idols seem to promise rewards, they always end up holding us back, since we have to sustain them. Idols also ruin our spiritual focus, since they cause us to emphasize the wrong things and to create the wrong expectations. This is just as much a danger for Christians as it is for the overtly worldly, and this is also why the church tends to rely on methods or slogans more than on God and on Jesus.

The worldly tend to rely on change in the world around them, rather than trying to change themselves from the inside. So too, in the church we can become too dependent on the spiritual environment around us, and we convince ourselves that our spiritual growth is someone else's responsibility. This is why Isaiah has so often stressed the nature of the remnant, for the servants God seeks are those who seek and love God even when those around them do not.

We are called (Isaiah 49) to be a light for the nations*, to be a living covenant of faith. We cannot do this as God desires until we discard our idols, whether they are overtly secular or whether they seem to be religious. The servant of the Lord does not set forth his or her own expectations for the church, but allows God's will to be done, whether it pleases our flesh or not.

* Or, "for the Gentiles", as some versions translate 49:6.

When we can face up to our own weaknesses, and can acknowledge how deeply we must rely on God's grace, and can see our idols for what they are, then we can see much more clearly how God is guiding us. We can accept the blessings of this life without becoming distracted by them or engrossed in them. We can know real security through God's constant presence, rather than worrying about worldly circumstances that we cannot control. We can be grateful when things go well, and hopeful when they do not. We can become the servants God calls us to be.

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

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Twelve: Choose God's Peace (Isaiah 48:1-22)

One of God's most outstanding characteristics is his willingness to let each one of us freely choose whether we will follow him, or whether we will take the things he gives us but then live for this world instead. God is always ready to warn us, to help us, to plead with us, to discipline us, or to reason with us. But the choice between him and the world will always be ours to make.

Review

In the relationship between the Lord and his servant (Isaiah 40-49), the prophet particularly emphasizes that there is no other God (Isaiah 44:6-45:25). It is an important step to realize that there is a God who lives and who created all things, but it is just as important to realize that only the one living God, not any of our man-made idols, is able to provide for our deepest needs.

We can be certain that God's purpose will stand (Isaiah 46:1-47:15). From beginning to end (of our lives, and of the world's history) he knows all about us and sustains us in every necessary way. Idols, in contrast, are a burden. They constantly require our protection to keep from toppling, and they are dependent on human worshipers to retain even the appearance of being 'gods'. God creates and sustains us, while we create and sustain idols.

Moreover, it is always God's desire to bless, even when he disciplines us or corrects us. Although we often struggle to place the proper value on God's blessings, we never need to doubt that it is always his wish to know us, to forgive our sins, and to reserve a place for us in eternity.

Isaiah issues a warning against false security, directed at Babylon but implicitly cautioning believers as well. Both unbelievers and believers can indulge in flesh-pleasing misconceptions that cause them to ignore hidden weaknesses. Babylon took false security in its size and power, while Judah took false security in its identity as God's people. Both thought that nothing bad could happen, and both took God's patience for granted. Both thus serve as a caution to us.

God Refines His Servants (Isaiah 48:1-11)

God understands both the limitations and the potential of human nature. So, when he refines us or examines us, he is well aware of our shortcomings, and he is well aware of the obstacles and temptations that we face. He asks us above all to have faith in him and in his ways, because then he can guide us wherever we are needed, and he can teach us whatever we need to learn.

God has encountered the obstacle of stubbornness (48:1-6a) in every era of history. Like ancient Judah, we want to be called God's people, and we invoke the name of the living God when we wish to establish something beyond doubt on his authority. Yet with our own desires or plans, we become reluctant to entrust everything fully to God. Christians praise the Bereans for comparing all that they heard with God's Word* to see whether it was true. Yet we do not like to accept the possibility that we, too, may need to re-examine our own opinions and beliefs.

* In Acts 17:10-12, Paul's audience in the city of Berea listened to his proclamation of the gospel, and then took considerable time examining the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament) to see if what Paul had told them about the Christ (the Messiah) was in accordance with Scripture.

This is why Isaiah describes his listeners as having iron sinews and bronze foreheads. They claim to have been taught nothing but the truth, and they see no need to think about the things they have chosen to believe. Today, the church of Christ also does not like to re-consider many of its own assumptions about God. Yet such complacency can destroy a relationship with God.

In our fellowship, a great many of the things we commonly believe do come from God's authority, yet others come from far less worthy sources. Many New Testament believers and congregations accept teachings that were actually proposed by denominational leaders, theologians, or writers. We can even eagerly believe things told us by secular leaders who have little genuine understanding of God. Because we are eager to satisfy our "itching ears", we often overlook the opportunism of those who use God's name for mere personal advantage,

Yet, just as God left no doubt that Isaiah's generation received no benefit from their idols, so too today's believers would do well to remember that neither secular leaders nor religious authorities have special standing or validity in God's eye. The truth is never decided by human experts or universities or elections or conclaves or councils, whether they claim to be religious or not.

God tests his people in a 'furnace'* (48:6b-11). He wants us to see and experience new and 'hidden' things, since he will give us blessings and joy that cannot be obtained using this world's methods. But to appreciate the things God offers us, we first have to perceive the comparative emptiness of this world's rewards. In practice, the only way that God can help us to learn such lessons is by allowing us to endure hardships - hence the seemingly grim analogy of a furnace.

* This analogy, also used by other inspired writers, refers to the practice of using extremely high temperatures to purify metals by burning off impurities, leaving the more durable (and more valuable) pure metal intact. God's 'furnace' burns off our faults and impurities, but leaves our more godly qualities intact.

Yet this is not meant to suggest punishment or even discipline, but rather purification. Many of the struggles we go through can help us develop godly qualities like perseverance, compassion, gentleness, and other qualities that the fleshly either ignore or disparage. The furnace of affliction that believers must enter is not really much different from the things that all humans on this planet must endure. But believers can know that even the most difficult times of their lives allow God a chance to refine and purify them in ways that ultimately will be of great value.

It is interesting to see Isaiah mention that God does these things 'for his own sake'* (verse 11). The phrase is somewhat ambiguous, for the main idea is not so much that God is seeking some kind of personal advantage, but rather that God always acts (and, in a sense, must act) according his own nature. It is not his nature to watch those he loves wallow in worldly folly without trying to strengthen them spiritually. He cares about our long-term spiritual well-being more than he cares about how we feel towards him at the present moment.

* At least one version translates the phrase as, "because of who I am", rather than "for my own sake".

And, as God openly tells us, he wishes to receive proper appreciation for who he is and for how he treats us. The glory he seeks is only what he deserves. God is not merely a brilliant Creator, but also a caring Father who loves us enough to endure our anger or displeasure when we don't understand the ways he acts for our own good. He is so patient with the insults and neglect he receives from the world - may we allow our lives (not just our lips) to praise his name.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is God not satisfied with our willingness to be his people in name only? What does this show about God's priorities? How did God make sure that the people of Isaiah's time could not honestly give credit for their blessings to idols? How has he done this for us? What kinds of 'furnaces' might we face? What impurities would God want to remove? What does this process show about God?

God's Plea For Faith (Isaiah 48:12-22)

Isaiah has emphasized at length the nature of idols, in order to encourage us to leave our own idols behind, and thus to place our faith completely in God. He knows that this is difficult, and so he reminds us of what God offers us. The peace God promises to our souls is deeper and more lasting than the temporary or superficial forms of peace that this world can offer.

Isaiah now makes a final 'challenge' to idols and idolaters (48:12-15), as a way of calling his readers to realize the spiritual benefits that will come if they are willing to turn away from their idols once for all. God is the first and last, the only Creator. How can a human, an object, or any other created thing ever attempt to compare with God in meeting our soul's needs? Which of our idols would not look silly stacked up against God? These are truly obvious questions, but Isaiah has dealt with them at length because he knows that idolatry is deeply rooted in the flesh.

Everything that God plans, and all who stand with God, will succeed - as God defines success. God has already chosen his future 'ally' (or instrument), Cyrus*, and has already decided on a course of action for the purpose of purifying his people. This purpose will succeed, and so too God's ultimate purposes in Jesus have succeeded and will succeed. The only uncertainty lies in our decisions, for each of us can decide whether or not to join God in his will and his purpose.

* Cyrus of Persia was the ruler who (after Isaiah's lifetime) would conquer Babylon and allow Judah to return home. He is mentioned by name in Isaiah 44:28, 45:1, and 45:13. See also last week's notes.

God's promise of peace, then, is a promise that we can be at peace with him (48:16-22). This is a peace that will last forever, and it is a much deeper peace than the kind of fragile, surface peace that the world pursues. The leaders and experts of this world attempt to keep the world's real problems hidden behind a shallow veneer, and even this they do with very limited success. In the church, unfortunately, we tend to do much the same thing. We analyze minor problems in detail, to distract attention from the real needs in our souls. We try to produce quick, outward results to re-assure ourselves that we can avoid dealing with the really difficult questions of faith.

God always teaches us what is best for us (verse 17). Yet this is really what lies at the heart of so many of our spiritual struggles, because we have a hard time accepting it - rather, our flesh has a hard time accepting it, because our souls rejoice in knowing that God's direction is always trustworthy. Our spirits know that the world has led us astray countless times, so knowing that God can be trusted is a great relief. But to enjoy this relief, we often must say 'no' to the flesh.

Here (verse 18) is where the song phrase, "peace like a river", comes from. The world's peace is just an absence of conflict or pain, and it never lasts long. God's peace is not the absence of something, but the presence of something: God himself. And his peace flows like a river, for it never runs dry, and it gives life. Note, though, that this great promise is phrased in a cautionary way - Isaiah's original audience did not receive it, for they sought worldly things instead.

Isaiah gives yet another glimpse of the future, foreseeing the day when the captives from Judah would leave Babylon with shouts of joy. Throughout several chapters (44-48), Isaiah ties together the dangers of idolatry with the promise of future renewal and recovery. Isaiah appeals to us to realize our need to turn away from our idols if we want to have the kind of lasting, fulfilling renewal that God wishes us to have. "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs" (Jonah 2:8).

Isaiah reminds us of the time that God provided water in the desert* for his people, and in doing so he implies that God will give us, too, a flow of living water in the middle of the spiritual 'desert' on this earth. Isaiah is reiterating God's promise of life and peace in several different ways, because the choice is ours to make; God will not force us to choose the right path.

* Isaiah is referring to Exodus 17:1-7, and possibly also Numbers 20:1-13. The second passage describes the incident that led to Moses being prohibited from entering the Promised Land in person.

With his warning that there is no peace for the wicked, the prophet reminds us that there is a choice to make. Idolaters of all kinds seek peace from their idols, but if they find any peace at all, it will not last. The only lasting peace is to be found in God.

God has made a deliberate and irrevocable choice that shows his compassion and his righteousness at the same time. True to his nature, he will not have fellowship with those who are guilty of sin. But also true to his nature, he gives everyone a fair chance to receive his grace. He himself made a great sacrifice in order to provide us with the access to his grace that we need. Grace, by definition, cannot be attained by our own power, knowledge, or effort.

Now it is up to us to make a choice. Will we see the creation and the cross, and yet decide that we prefer the false promises of this world's idols? Or will we turn aside from the world's distractions and lies, so that we can know the true peace and lasting hope that God gives us? We can choose whatever we wish, for God will not force us to do his will. He has made clear both the promises of acceptance and the consequences of rejection.

Isaiah does not want us to worry about what to 'do', or how to prove ourselves to God. Instead, he calls us to "reason together" spiritually. If we can accept in our hearts that God alone has what we truly need, and can honestly tell God that we are willing and ready to trust in him alone, then he can teach us and guide us from there.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what sense does God want us to compare our idols with him? What decisions does he wish us to make? How much time does he allow us for these decisions? What kind of peace does God offer us? How does it compare with the world's peace? What does it show about God that he allows us freely to choose between him and this world?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, August 2008

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THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 28-49

Notes For Week Thirteen: A Light For The Nations (Isaiah 49:1-26)

God realizes how easily we can become pre-occupied with our own plans. The blessings and the ministries that he has in mind for us are often much different from the ones we are thinking about. This was true in ancient Judah, and it is equally true today. Thus, Isaiah now tries to help us to adjust our perspective, so that we can see how much better it is to follow God's will.

Review of Recent Classes

This section of Isaiah (chapters 40-49) focuses on the relationship between the Lord and his servant. The servant knows that there is no other God (Isaiah 44:6-45:25), and thus rejects all idols. God's purpose alone will stand (Isaiah 46:1-47:15), since all idols (whether tangible or intangible) are incapable of providing lasting blessings that can satisfy the needs of the soul.

The prophet thus exhorts us to choose God's peace rather than the world's false promises (Isaiah 48:1-22). God refines his servants in the furnace of affliction, in order to purify them. To do this, he must face the obstacle of human stubbornness. The human wish to create our own 'gods' causes us often to resist or misunderstand God's will and Word. Even believers may sometimes refuse to give up their self-will, and God does not force us to believe in him or to trust in him.

God's plea is that we put our faith in him alone. Isaiah thus makes a final challenge to those who worship idols, pointing out how much more God has to offer. God promises us peace, and his promise is certain. He does not offer the kind of fragile, surface-only peace that the world aims for, but a lasting peace that comes from knowing who we are and what we are called to be.

God Calls To His Servants (Isaiah 49:1-7)

God has known each of us from the time of our birth, and perhaps even before. God knows all of our needs and all of our limitations. Since no worldly purpose or goal would be truly worthy of the souls he has created, he allows us to share in his own work of salvation. Far from intending this as a burden, God wishes the lives of his children to have lasting meaning and purpose.

Isaiah considers how God had called him from his birth (49:1-4), and he urges his audience* to ponder upon the implications of this. God has prepared him and also has protected him, giving him all that he would need to seek and serve God. In his own time, Isaiah might be something of a special case, since he was called to prophetic ministry during the era of the Old Covenant. Now, though, God gives each person life with the hope that he or she will come to Jesus, and will allow Jesus' blood to provide complete cleansing and forgiveness.

* Isaiah's exhortation, "listen to me, you islands; hear this you distant nations" is a rhetorical way of saying that the coming statement is applicable to everyone, everywhere. It does not refer to any literal islands - this is just an expression, meaning that even those in remote and obscure places should listen.

As we strive to understand what it means to be called by God, the right expectations are crucial. This is the meaning of the interchange in verse 4 - the servant feels at first that his labor in the Lord is in vain, but then reconsiders the kinds of rewards God promises. We can easily identify with this kind of internal struggle. Who does not wish to see his or her sacrifice and devotion pay off in tangible results? What believer doesn't long to see others come to know God?

Yet even the great examples of faith often had very limited success in their earthly ministries*, and many of them also underwent some painful experiences. Often their greatest effect came after they themselves had died (consider also how this applies to Jesus). As hard as this can be to realize, it is the way God wills it, for he wants to know that we minister and serve because it is the right thing to do, not because we are counting on positive results.

* Isaiah himself is an example of this. Except during the reign of Hezekiah, he was out of favor with the leaders of Judah, and his message was not popular. Jeremiah is an even more extreme example. For a possible study topic, consider also how other prophets were received in their lifetimes.

Because churches so often give in to our secular society's fleshly emphasis on competition and results, many believers find such thoughts confusing or even disturbing. This is because, as the prophet says, many of the plans and goals we set are in actuality "too small a thing" (49:5-7) to be truly worthy of those who have been called by the living God, of those who have been "honored in the eyes of the Lord" by receiving his grace, his compassion, and his Spirit.

Even one of Isaiah's own prophecies is given as an example of this. The prophet has repeatedly foretold that there will be a coming exile because of Judah's idolatry and pride, but that God has already planned for the nation to return home at the appropriate time. The promise of physical restoration was held dear by some later generations, but to God it was only the start of something much larger, only one step in a much broader design.

Although it is considered 'normal' for Christians to take passionate positions on current events or political issues, such matters are in truth "too small a thing" to merit deep concern from believers. Likewise, the light and salvation that come through Christ are too transcendent to be measured by attendance or contribution numbers. Focusing on outward results, hawking Christianity as if it were a commercial product, using worldly methodologies or models for the church - these things trivialize the calling God has given us. The power is in the gospel, and this power can override any and all worldly distractions when it is proclaimed simply and truthfully.

God wishes his truth to be taken to the ends of the earth, but outward results are neither guaranteed nor demanded. Instead, this is a promise of the suitability of the Messianic ministry, for God and his Messiah are always the answer, the message, and the way. We do not need to doubt either the validity or the importance of the gospel of grace. To be sure, teaching such a message to a sinful world is a difficult task. But anything else is indeed "too small a thing".

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what sense is everyone called by God? What implications does this have? Why are our expectations important? Why was the physical restoration of Judah "too small a thing"? How should we adjust our own perspective? In what sense does God want his salvation brought "to the ends of the earth"? What kind of responsibility does this give us? In what various ways might different believers fulfill it?

The Time Of God's Favor (Isaiah 49:8-13)

God grants salvation, spiritual strength, and eternal promises to those he holds in his favor. Yet the way into his favor is found only through grace, not through works or knowledge. Our faith in his promise of forgiveness allows us to glimpse the full measure of the spiritual blessings he wants to give us. Living in God's favor benefits us in ways that are hard for the flesh to grasp.

Once more, Isaiah makes the curious statement that God's servant is called not merely to enter into a covenant with God, but actually to 'be' a covenant* (49:8-9a). As the prophet has implied in the previous verses, God's idea of ministry is not a mere numbers game, but a revelation of light to a dark world. We thus enjoy the blessing of living in God's favor, since there is an importance to godly living that transcends any results that it brings.

* Compare 49:8 with Isaiah 42:6 (and see also the notes to that passage).

To live as God asks us to live means that we must at times sacrifice worldly pleasures, we must often ignore worldly criticism and hostility, and we must sometimes readjust viewpoints we have held strongly. The willingness to do such things makes us a living covenant that pleases God.

Isaiah's phrase, "the day of salvation" carries some stirring connotations*. Yet he is not referring to one particular day, but to any day in which we as believers can know that God has saved us. As a living covenant, we can see how God's light penetrates anyplace that we allow it to. We can come out of our worldly prisons of sin and self, and we can also offer help to others who want to be free of these things.

* For example, this verse is quoted in 2 Corinthians 6:2. (Compare the contexts there and here.)

All this has nothing to do with our merit or personal qualities, but comes because God himself is clearing the way for those who wish to come to him (49:9b-13). Once more (verse 11), we see Isaiah's imagery of a highway built by God to enable anyone, anywhere, any time to come to him. Note how the prophet in this passage emphasizes the ways that God meets our spiritual and physical needs, and how persons will come to him from far off and from many directions*. All this is made possible because of the spiritual highway that God has built.

* The latter is emphasized in verse 12. The reference to 'Sinim' is ambiguous, and commentators try to associate it with a variety of nations. Some versions translate it 'Aswan', referring to the ancient location in Egypt now known by that name. In any case, Isaiah's reference indicates a far-off, (then) obscure location.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What or when is the time of God's favor? Is this the same as the day of salvation? How does God clear the way for us to come to him? How does this also enable him to meet our needs? How do the needs mentioned in these verses apply to us? What responsibility do we have in this area?

God Never Forgets (Isaiah 49:14-26)

When we look at all the violence, injustice, and suffering in this world, it can be easy to feel that God has forgotten about us. But God never forgets, and he always knows exactly what is going

on. Yet his purposes are different from ours, and so it is only when we adopt his perspective that we can begin to understand what he is doing, and can be more fully comforted by his promises.

God promises not to forget us (49:14-18), any more than a mother would forget her child. God's bond with us is even stronger than that of a mother, since he created us. He knows how easy it is to feel that he has forsaken us; indeed, even Jesus expressed exactly this while on the cross*. So it is not a 'sin' if we feel that God has forgotten us - as long as we realize that it is only a feeling, and that it is a feeling we can deal with through prayer and meditation on God's Word.

* Clearly, if Jesus said this, then it cannot be a sin. It is simply a reflection of the natural effect of sin on our relationship with God (Jesus was innocent of his own sin, but bore the sins of others on the cross). Thus, to feel that God has forgotten us reflects only that our spirits are clouded by sin; it is not in itself a sin. Likewise, Jesus' tearful prayer in Gethsemane suggests that being fearful or discouraged are not sins.

It is actually a divine impossibility for God to forget those he has created. The real obstacle to our understanding is that God focuses on the spiritual side of life, and on the long-term good, not on the things that usually matter the most to us. When we can remember this (which is, indeed, difficult to accept), then God's will is not quite so frustrating, and his presence is less distant. God often asks us to do something solely because it is the right thing to do, even if he knows that no positive 'results' will come about. Isaiah's own ministry provides some examples of this.

We live under God's "banner" (49:19-26); that is, our allegiance should be first, last, and always to God. This echoes Isaiah's remark that anything else is "too small a thing". God does not 'win' every battle on this earth, nor does he claim to. But the prophet implies different and better promises. No matter what the present holds - whether good, bad, or a mixture of both - we can know with certainty that there is a better future awaiting us. Those who live for this world must constantly worry about their future, since nothing they have is ever guaranteed to last.

The prophet reiterates that God's wish is for all to know the true Lord. God wants us to know him, himself, not simply to acknowledge his 'existence' or even his power. God's use of his power is thus directed towards this end. It would be a simple matter for God to exert his power in drastic, unmistakable ways that would immediately convince everyone in the world of his existence and his power. But God does not want this.

Therefore, when Isaiah speaks of kings and queens eagerly giving believers all of their devotion and possessions, this is not going to occur in a literal fashion. As Paul told the Corinthians, all things on earth already belong to our Father, and thus to us (1 Corinthians 3:21-23), so that competition or ambition are unnecessary. This does not mean that we can lay claim to anything we desire - rather, because all things are God's, we can be sure that he is able to give us anything that we need. Those who have this hope will not be disappointed.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kinds of things make us feel that God has forgotten us? How can this passage help us in such situations? How can we be sure that God remembers us? What does God want the world to know about him? How can this influence our lives and ministries? What kind of hope does God want us to put in him?

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

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