THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

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

The first part of Isaiah reminds us that of the many millions of souls God has created, many of them will never return to him; yet he remains faithful and he waits patiently for those who do return. This 'remnant' is dear to God, and whenever one of us seeks him, he will provide a 'highway' so that we may find him.

Hear Me, You Heavens; Listen, Earth (Isaiah 1:1-9)

The book of Isaiah opens with an appeal to turn to God, at a time when most of God's people have drifted away from God and have forgotten how much they need him. Things look good outwardly, but inside they are afflicted and discontented, and they do not realize why. The imagery in this scripture depicts the inner desolation that comes when we are not near God.

Before the prophet describes their 'injured' heads and afflicted hearts (1:1-6), Isaiah describes his book as a vision from God. Vision involves sharpness of sight, that is, ability to see things clearly. The prophet does not see things as he wishes them to be, but as they truly are. He also sees things that will be, both 'good' and 'bad'. Isaiah does not daydream or fantasize about God's people; he always tells them the truth.

We are all God's own children, indeed his own creations, yet so often we willfully follow our own ways and willfully deny our need for him to sustain us. Isaiah points out that even the dull-brained ox knows who his master is, and even the stubborn donkey acknowledges the source and location of his food. So he asks us, since these beasts can have this awareness, why would we persist in believing that we are strong enough or wise enough to rely on our own strength and knowledge.

These wounds and injuries are mostly figurative, since at this time there was outward prosperity. But their spirits were uneasy, restless, there was no 'soundness' in them. Human beings are created with an innate need for God; to deny this is to deny our own nature. Yet even believers try to find other things to play the role that God alone is meant to play. It is far better to acknowledge our many weakness, so that God can give us what we need (as Jesus tells us in Revelation 3:17-18).

The following images of the spiritual desolation that permeates their lives also foreshadow the physical discipline that may well take place unless they will turn back to God (1:7-9). When Isaiah foresees invasions that will make the land laid waste*, this will only be a physical manifestation of the ways that the people have already allowed worldly perspectives to invade their lives.

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

The image of a hut in a cucumber field* represents isolation and fragility; and the image of a city under siege implies fear and helplessness. Again, when this takes place literally, it is only a physical parallel of the siege of the world's thinking and its ways.

> * Farmers used to build these temporary shelters during time of harvest, and afterwards would abandon them; so they were distant from home, and were not built to last.

Yet God promises that he will always watch over the 'survivors' (which Isaiah will often refer to as the 'remnant', for example in Isaiah 10:21-22), both physically and literally. The remnant will still have to undergo many trials, yet we can have the peace of knowing that God is with us and he understands what we need to endure in this world.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah contrast the awareness of animals with the spiritual rebellion of God's people? What harm have the people suffered (and will they suffer) from their spiritual illnesses? Why will foreign invasions be appropriate as discipline? What would the promise of 'survivors' have meant to Isaiah's listeners? What does all this tell us about God and our relationship with him?

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

Regardless of how far we may have strayed from God, he is always willing to forgive us when we return to him. Yet here we see that we cannot stay close with God by outward worship nor by making outward sacrifices. God has compassion on us and he desires to bless us; yet he also calls us to seek a relationship with him based on his grace and his love, not on our works.

Isaiah starts to clarify where the real problem lies - though they continue to make frequent offerings and assemble regularly, these have become meaningless (1:10-17). God's weariness with such pointless activity helps us understand what really matters to him. We too can substitute entertainment for worship, and can substitute rote answers for understanding God and his words. Outward worship only matters to God if it comes from a humble and reverent heart.

Even as they worship God outwardly, they are living without concern or pity for others less fortunate; they worship God only for the positive feelings that it gives them, and they think that by doing this they deserve to be blessed. Thus Isaiah calls them, as well as us, to wash ourselves and learn to do right out of love and reverence for God. We cannot do these by human methods nor by our own will power, yet Isaiah is about to explain God's willingness to do this for us.

The world deals with everything by quick fixes and faulty logic, and it appeals to our false hopes and our earthly ambitions. As believers in eternal things, we are not meant to use these same worldly ways; we have different, spiritual goals, and we ought also to pursue them by more spiritual, godly means (as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 23:25-26)

In this context, Isaiah makes his well-known appeal to reason together* (1:18-20). God wants us to understand him, he does not want or need slaves; he desires closeness with us. So, when we have strayed, he calls us simply to draw near. He does not call for dramatic demonstrations of our good intentions, but for us to allow him to repair our relationship with him. Our extraordinary God will explain, teach, and correct us with all patience, as long as we need it.

> * This is the way verse 18 is most commonly translated. The word in the original implies a respectful exchange of views, to come to a consensus; with the implication that when we approach God humbly with an open mind, God will be able to help us understand our need for him.

Moreover, God is eager to forgive us and to cleanse us and to bless us spiritually. Our sins glow blood-red as they testify against us, yet God waits for us to let him wash them away and make us pure. Here again is the contrast between God's nature and human thinking. He does not expect

his people to make up for all the things they have done wrong - indeed, this would be impossible. Rather, our offenses will be forgotten in God's joy over our return.

Thus Isaiah calls us to choose of our own will to seek God from our hearts, to approach him with a willing spirit that acknowledges our need for him each step. No one can make this decision for us; likewise, when we realize our complete dependence on God's love and mercy, we can appeal him for help. As soon as we set aside worldly methods, God can provide whatever our spirits may need to keep us close with him.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is God not pleased with their sacrifices and assemblies? What does this tell us about God and about our relationship with him? How does God want them to change? What does the prophet mean by 'reason together'? What does this say to us today?

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

As God appeals to his people, he already has in mind what he will need to do if most of them do not open their hearts. They have wandered too far for God to let them continue drifting, so he will purge, cleanse, and prune them. But even during this painful process, the faithful will always have God's promise of closeness and restoration.

The once-faithful city of Jerusalem is in spiritual ruin (1:21-26). Its silver has become dross (slag), and when it falls physically, it will only be a confirmation of what has long since happened inside the hearts of the people. It symbolizes all that can go wrong - self-centeredness, greed, indifference, and more. They have become so pre-occupied with their own agendas and desires that they do not realize how hard their hearts have become.

So discipline is now a sad necessity. They must be purged and cleansed, to remove the dross (slag) and to renew them inwardly. Yet even this is God's promise to cleanse them and restore them, so that they may become faithful to him, to become again the 'Faithful City'. Over the years, this process would play out with the physical nation, yet to God it is even more important to do this in each of our lives.

Moreover, there will always be faithful believers who must suffer for being surrounded by others who are unwilling to seek God humbly. Sometimes this may pass quickly, other times it may last a lifetime. Yet at all times, the promise of a highway for the remnant can offer the consolation that our afflictions will not be meaningless (see also John 16:33). Even if we never see better times or positive changes, we can know that our times matter as much to God as any other era.

Isaiah's opening appeal closes with the promise that Zion will be delivered (1:27-31). Yet it also comes with a caution about the discipline that will be involved. Those who walk by faith and who follow Jesus will never be part of the mainstream in any society on earth. Even for the most faithful believers, it can be difficult to learn how to walk in step with the Spirit, and it can often be hard to see the next step.

When we endure times of discipline, God uses them to keep our hearts soft and our spirits humble. Discipline comes for everyone, whether strong or weak, rich or poor. Those who consider themselves mighty are nothing but tinder for the fire, and the works they boast about will be the

spark that lights the fire. Likewise, the moment we begin to follow our own agendas, we are like a garden without water, a field that cannot produce anything meaningful to God.

In Isaiah's lifetime, God often dealt with his people as a physical nation. Today, he proclaims the same message to every individual soul, presents the same choice, gives the same cautions, and offers the same promises. Each of us must make his or her own choices, for your relationship with God is the one thing that you can always have; it will always be your own, and no one can take it from you.

Some Historical Background

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

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

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

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

During Isaiah's ministry, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC. Judah went through a recurring cycle of spiritual decay followed by spiritual reform, followed again by decay. The northern kingdom (Israel) was constantly plagued by idolatry during its entire existence.

As we study Isaiah 1-19, first we'll see Isaiah's message to turn to God (Isaiah 1-6). He will help us understand what this means, and he will help us see things from God's point of view. The next section of Isaiah tells us about a time of trials, and also gives us some of Isaiah's most memorable promises, for in this section we will see several Messianic prophecies. Then we shall see God's call to the world (Isaiah 13-19), and we can see that even then everyone mattered to God.

The message of this part of Isaiah is summarized by God's promise that there will be a highway for the remnant who seek him (Isaiah 11:15-12:3). As God once did physically, he will break up the river we couldn't have crossed, the river of our sins and flaws and limitations that kept us from knowing him. So this highway will reach anyone anywhere at any time. God himself is our salvation and he is all our strength, and he renews us with water from his wells of salvation.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is God lamenting about? What is the 'dross' he desires to remove? How does God intend to do this? What promises is God making? What does all this tell us about God's nature?

- Mark Garner, June 2018

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

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

As we read through the book of Isaiah, we shall often see the prophet alternate encouraging messages with sobering warnings, and uplifting promises with direct admonitions. In this scripture, he talks about the 'day' God has in store; he will tell them of God's desire to bless them spiritually, while he also cautions them to stop trusting in human thinking and human strength.

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

This scripture contains some memorable prophecies about Jesus. The imagery of the 'mountain of the Lord' would have helped the faithful at the time to understand what mattered to God, yet it finds its ultimate fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus and the blessings it brings to those who believe in him. It concludes with Isaiah simply calling us to walk in the light of the Lord.

The content and the phrase 'in the last days*, help us see that these verses look ahead to the promised Messiah (2:1-5, see also Hebrews 1:1-3 and Micah 4:1-5). The imagery of the temple on a mountain calls to mind the physical location of the ancient temple in Jerusalem, which rested on the top of a plateau, so that those traveling towards the city would see it and its temple high above them.

> * See, for example, Hebrews 1:2 and Acts 2:17.

In this prophetic image, the mountain of the Lord's temple is higher than all the rest, and the natural imagery is combined with a fanciful note, as the nations are streaming uphill to reach it. The church of Jesus is not an earthly or physical kingdom, and his temple is not a physical structure or location (Revelation 21:22-23), so that those who come to it must go 'uphill', to go against the perspectives and inclinations of the world.

This is an expression of the eagerness for God that Isaiah calls his readers to have, as in his call to go up to God's 'temple' so that he may teach his ways and may show us his paths. The image of Gentile nations streaming so enthusiastically to 'their' God also reminds us of God's care for everyone from every nation, even in Isaiah's time. Likewise, the image of the 'law' (that is the message of Jesus) going out from Mount Zion* reminds us that it is for everyone.

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

The memorable images of peace describe a peace that can only come from God. Lasting peace* has been eagerly sought for millennia by the world's leaders and thinkers, but the worldly will never find it. Only in Jesus can those with inherently different interests and perspectives be brought to real harmony. Yet it is speaking even more deeply, about the lasting peace we can have with God when we stop fighting him and set aside our agendas, and simply learn to walk by faith.

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

So the prophet adds his call, 'let us walk in the light of the Lord'; or as Micah puts it, instead of walking in the name of worldly idols, walk in the name of the Lord forever. As Isaiah will soon detail, this will involve letting God cleanse us of our 'dross' and our preconceptions and false hopes, so that he may teach us about his nature and what really matters to him.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah use the phrase 'the last days'? Why does he use the image of a mountain? Why does Isaiah use figurative images instead of literal descriptions? Explain how they are fulfilled in Jesus. What might they have meant to Isaiah's original listeners, and how did God hope for them to respond? What do they tell us about God and his nature?

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

Now Isaiah vividly describes some of the spiritual ills that are all too common in any era. God calls us to place our faith fully in him and in him alone, not in human teachings nor in human achievements nor in human strength. As the prophet tells us about the day that the Lord has in store, he also tells us that in that day the Lord alone will be exalted.

As the prophet describes a land that is full of both idols and treasures, note that he is addressing believers (2:6-11). In any time and place, human nature tends to trust in what is seen rather than God. Here, they are eagerly imitating worldly practices, and they worship human-made things - in a sense, worshiping themselves. They erroneously assume that their success and wealth are signs that they are 'righteous', and they have become calloused to those who have less.

So they will be taught how easily human pride can be brought low. *God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble* (James 4:6); for human pride hardens our hearts, it makes us determined to follow our own ways, and it makes us take God's grace and love and blessings for granted. Yet as always, God does not punish for punishment's sake. He humbles us so that he may pour out his grace on us. As Isaiah says, in that day, the Lord alone will be exalted.

When God rises to shake the earth (2:12-22), it is never out of mere annoyance nor spite. God will always prefer to be patient and compassionate, but our stubborn hearts can eventually make it necessary that he discipline us out of spiritual necessity. The 'day'* that the Lord Almighty has in store does not refer to the 'end times'; rather, it is a day, any time, when God clearly calls our attention to our need for him, whether through discipline or humbling or simply by instructing us.

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

This will be a 'day' for humbling humanity, for exalting God, and for removing idols (Isaiah 57:15). These are inter-related, since all three emphasize that God alone is worthy of exaltation and worship. God humbles all human strength and wisdom - the prophet illustrates this with images of humans diving into caverns and clinging to crags, to escape God's wrath. Their own devices and ideas cannot stand against God, so they can only take refuge in his creation.

The images of former idolaters gladly tossing their idols to the moles and rats and bats (who probably have the good sense not to worship the idols) reminds us that when God exposes our idols, it will be a relief rather than a punishment. Even aside from those occasions on which God may act openly, it is not hard to see how often human-made idols are shown to be worthless and without substance.

Humans often continue to look for new and equally useless idols, so the prophet reminds us instead to turn away from relying on things in this world that cannot meet the real needs of humanity. Isaiah also advises us to develop a proper reverence and gratitude for God now, so that we will not have to be overwhelmed with 'the fearful presence of the Lord'. Instead, those who have placed their hope fully in him can rejoice in seeing 'the splendor of his majesty' displayed.

Besides calling us not to trust in our wealth nor in our own abilities, Isaiah also tells us not to put our trust in mere humans. Human beings were created to seek, serve, and worship God. Other persons ought to evoke our compassion, grace, and empathy, but never worship. We are to love our neighbors, not worship them.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: How can the land be full of treasures and full of idols at the same time? Does this tell us anything about God? What kind of a 'day' is Isaiah talking about? What form may it take? How would God want us to respond to it? What does this tell us about our walk with God?

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

The imagery in these verses emphasizes God's desire to cleanse us, even when it necessitates discipline and humbling. No one is exempt, regardless of what we have done or possess. This imagery may seem harsh, even troubling, yet it conveys how deeply God is concerned with our hearts. His call is to let go of everything else we rely on, and take hold of the one man Jesus.

Isaiah's reminder that God can humble believers and unbelievers alike (3:1-15). Unlike the world, God does not view persons in terms of position, credentials, talent, or other such things. Unlike the world, God does not consider any human to be more important or less important than any other human. When discipline comes, warriors and judges will be treated no differently from craftsmen. Our hearts matter to God more than talent or position.

Isaiah's images of the people being oppressed by youths and women is meant simply to illustrate the ways that the Israelites are oppressing and misleading one another, whether they are young or old or men or women. They have 'brought disaster upon themselves' (verse 9) not by a sudden decision to leave God, nor by a few severely sinful actions, but rather by a long, slow process of trusting in earthly things.

Yet even as Isaiah warns of the need for them to be refined and purified, he tells the righteous that it will be well with them. As Habakkuk would remind us in a later era, those who are righteous will walk by faith instead of by sight, and God will be close to help us endure and to give us what our souls need (Habakkuk 2:2-4).

These believers have unfortunately reversed a pattern by going from spiritual riches to worldly rags (3:16-4:1). Their lives of luxury and finery conceal (and also demonstrate) their inward emptiness and the meaningless nature of their activities. The coming outward destitution is

graphically depicted in the images of the women* of Judah with their luxury and finery being removed, just as inwardly they are already degraded and desolate.

> * This is a figurative image, rather than just a criticism of the Israelite women in particular. Instead, it depicts believers as God's beloved (for other examples, see 2 Corinthians 11:2 and also the image of 'the bride of the Lamb' in Revelation 19:7 and 21:9). Here, these 'brides' (male and female) have turned away from their first love (God) and are finding security and meaning in outward things.

The prophet even goes into minute detail in listing all of the objects that they have foolishly valued and enjoyed more than they valued God and his teachings. Consider how humbling it would it be if God were to list all of the objects and activities that we ourselves prefer to simply rejoicing in his presence, talking with him, and listening to his words. So Isaiah calls us to humility, and to seek God with our hearts without getting entangled in outward appearances.

This is summarized in the image that closes this section, as it depicts seven women taking hold of one man, asking only for him to take away their disgrace. This image is again of us as God's beloved, this time when we come to realize our deep need for him every moment. Isaiah is calling us to let go of the world's false hopes, to stop trusting in human ways and human strength, and to take hold of the one Man Jesus who came to bring us redemption and salvation and eternal life.

Instead of trusting in things we can see and grasp, God calls us to hold firmly to Jesus (Hebrews 4:12-16). Everything is clear to God; he can see our hearts and he knows our ways, so no matter how many humans we deceive, God is not deceived. Yet at the same time he sent his Son to be our great high priest, who has opened the curtain to God's Most Holy Place. So despite our sins and weaknesses, we may draw near, and receive the mercy and grace and understanding we need.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Why does Isaiah use such harsh imagery? What response does God hope for? Explain how it 'will be well' with the righteous even when they may endure times of discipline like everyone else. Why does the prophet go into detail about the finery and clothing people were wearing? What does the image in Isaiah 4:1 tell us about our relationship with God?

- *Mark Garner, June 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

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

Isaiah now uses two similar images. First, the image of a life-giving Branch is another of God's promises that take place on two different levels, the promised renewal of Israel and the complete cleansing that comes through Jesus. Then, the image of the vineyard reminds us of all the care God wants to give us, and it reminds us to listen to him instead of following our own ways.

The Branch Of The Lord Will Be Glorious (Isaiah 4:2-6)

This image looks ahead to the Messiah, and at the same time it also connects several themes and images found in other books of the Old Testament. It promises the complete cleansing that can only come by God's grace, while the image of the canopy of God surrounding us also promises guidance, protection, and reassurance.

The vision of the beautiful 'Branch of the Lord' ties together several concepts (4:2-4). The image of a branch expresses life and growth, blessings that in their truest forms can only come from God. The Branch* is also a prophetic image that is frequently used to represent the Messiah (see also Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12; also see below how John 15 uses similar imagery in a somewhat different way).

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

The Branch allows God's people to experience and benefit from the full, true fruit of knowing God, whether in or out of season (Revelation 22:1-2. The Messiah helps us to understand and appreciate that the real 'fruit of the land' consists of blessings such as peace, security, grace, mercy, and spiritual contentment. These come in lasting form only through God and his 'Branch', Jesus.

Notice that these blessings, these fruits of the Spirit, are promised to 'the survivors in Israel', that is, the remnant of humanity who turn to Jesus*. Cleansing, as Isaiah promises here, must take place before enjoying the blessings that the Branch brings. God's highest aspirations for us do not involve material things or earthly privileges, rather he wants to make us holy, to make us his own children, so the presence of God may live among us.

> * As we often see in Isaiah, this was fulfilled in a short-term, limited way when God brought back a remnant to Judah and Jerusalem after the exile to Babylon. Then this promise found complete fulfillment in the coming of Jesus.

Along with these blessings that the Branch brings, God promises to surround us with a 'canopy' of his presence and his glory, by day and by night (4:5-6). Notice the images of the ways that God once led his people in the desert*. When the Judeans turned back to God, he would again shield them from foes stronger than them; and now through Jesus the Messiah, God's presence shields our souls, and we have God's Spirit who provides us with guidance and reassurance.

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

The Branch also provides God's people with shelter and refuge. Again, in Jesus these blessings take a deeper form beyond the physical ways in which God protected his people under the Old Covenant. Jesus offers us refuge from the cold, meaningless nature of worldly living; he gives us shelter and protection from the world's assaults on our relationship with God; he gives us an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:18-19)

> Questions for Discussion or Study: In what ways is a branch an appropriate image for the Messiah? What would this image have meant for Isaiah's original audience? What does the image of a 'canopy' imply? Explain how this applies to believers in Jesus. What do these images tell us about God's nature and about our walk with him?

A Vineyard On A Fertile Hillside (Isaiah 5:1-7)

Like the Branch, a vineyard suggests life and growth. But this vineyard has not produced good fruit, despite the care that has been poured out upon it. The prophet uses this theme both to explain to the people of his own time their need for God, and also to caution us about how easy it is to drift away from God when we think that we can sustain ourselves.

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

> * Compare this song with Psalm 80:8-19. In that Psalm, notice the ways that Old Testament imagery is combined with imagery of Jesus.

Since the crop of this vineyard is worse than useless, the farmer decides to abandon the vineyard, to let it become a wasteland. He will even make clear to passers-by that the land is useless, by removing all hedges and walls. The abundance of fruit might look good, so the farmer wants others to know not to be deceived by it. Producing outward results is not nearly as difficult as it is to keep our hearts soft and open so that God can renew us inwardly and keep us near.

The meaning of the song is simple and somber (5:7). God has lavished upon both Judah and Israel his grace, wisdom, and compassion, for he considered them the 'vines' he delighted in. This makes his hurt and disappointment that much worse when they ignore him. Instead of producing 'good fruit', instead of being humble and appreciative, both nations were full of hard hearts and ingratitude and pride. So this song is another reminder that God wants our hearts above all.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What does the image of the vineyard tell us about God, and about how he feels towards us? Would the message have been the same for Isaiah's original hearers as it is today? What response does God hope for?

Woes & Hope (Isaiah 5:8-30)

Isaiah now becomes very specific in detailing the ways that God's people have turned away from the things that God had told them. Their actions, perspectives, and motivation have become as

worldly and as short-sighted as those of any unbeliever. The spiritual problems that the prophet are a reminder for us of the need to remain close to God.

We now see an echo of the imagery from chapter 2, as Isaiah tells us that the Lord Almighty will be exalted (5:8-23). Isaiah's series of pronouncements of "woe to those who . . . " (5:8-23) can be compared with Jesus' criticisms of the Pharisees in Matthew 23. The list of specifics is different, yet both scriptures caution us about the false hopes and unreliable foundations that humans are prone to pursue and value.

As Isaiah warns the greedy, it is interesting to note that God will not necessarily destroy their houses and fields themselves, but rather will make the houses desolate and the fields unfruitful. After all, it is not these physical locations and objects that are to blame, but rather the attitudes of their 'owners' towards them.

Seekers of pleasure are also warned that God will deal with them. As they have become pre-occupied with the ways that their bodies can experience pleasing sensations, they have gradually ceased to appreciate the works and wisdom of God. Rationalizing sin also evokes a cry of woe from the prophet. Isaiah explains how pride and skepticism can lead to willfully twisting the truth.

Those who are wise in their own eyes also come in for their share of 'woe', for it is prideful to exalt human wisdom above that of God. In truth, there is no such thing as a truly wise human, unless perhaps it is one who realizes his or her complete dependence on God's grace and wisdom. Finally, Isaiah calls 'woes' upon those who enjoy boasting about what they have and do, and upon those who practice injustice and ignore the needs of others.

But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and God will be proved holy by his righteous acts (Isaiah 55:6-8). God's primary interest in 'justice' is not merely negative (punishment of the guilty), rather, his kind of justice is positive: fair treatment of the innocent and honest, even if they cannot offer money or other incentives in return.

As Isaiah tells us, God's thoughts and ways are far higher than ours. Compare God's sense of justice with earthly systems of 'justice', in which truth and right matter much less than worldly knowledge, courtroom tactics, personal ambitions, and financial resources. Likewise, God's sense of righteousness reflects his desire to do what is right and to give us what is right and what we need, instead of being concerned with outward appearances.

Moreover, he will feed us as in our own pasture (John 10:7-11), although the pasture has always been his. Jesus is our good Shepherd who came to bring us the true life of knowing our God, rather than a mere existence collecting things that will soon fade away. Jesus is our good Shepherd who has shown us the holiness of God's ways and has shown us how wide and deep God's love is.

The root of these woes is summarized by Isaiah's statement about 'spurning the Word of the Holy One', for they simply thought they knew better (5:24-30). So they have no protection from the accuser's attacks and temptations. Like dry grass in the flames, they are defenseless. They are already utterly defeated spiritually, and this will soon be reflected outwardly when they are attacked and defeated by distant nations. Already the roar of these 'lions' can be heard.

Isaiah's caution about spurning God's Word is directed to people who generally believed its factual teachings and often followed its outward commands. It is quite possible even to accept these things and still to have a disregard for the values and perspectives of God, so the prophet is reminding us again of the need to seek and serve God with our hearts. Isaiah notes that God's hand is still upraised - to bring discipline if necessary, or to lift us up when we acknowledge and seek him.

The imagery of vines and branches also appears in Jesus' call for us to remain in the Vine (John 15:1-9). He is our true Vine who gives us life and whom we depend on to sustain us every moment. Without him, our spirits will quickly wither and die, regardless of how things may look externally. So Jesus gently reassures us that all he asks us is to remain in him, to continue trusting in God's love and his mercy, and he will remain in us.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What does the phrase 'woe to you' imply or suggest? Why does each of the things he mentions merit this dire pronouncement? How are many of these woes caused by ignoring God's word? What does all this tell us about God's character and what he really wants from us?

- *Mark Garner, June 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

Notes For Week Four: Holy, Holy, Holy Is The Lord Almighty (Isaiah 6)

After having laid out the main themes of God's message, the prophet now recounts his personal encounter with God. This experience overwhelms him and humbles him, and it gives Isaiah a brief glimpse at God's vastness and majesty. As God explains the message that he wants Isaiah to proclaim, he also cautions him that his listeners will not respond as readily as the prophet has.

Images Of God's Holiness & Splendor (Isaiah 6:1-4)

When Isaiah finds himself before God's throne, he is overwhelmed with powerful sights and sounds, so that God's absolute holiness is impressed upon him. Before God sends Isaiah to carry out the prophetic ministry that he has in mind for him, the prophet will first be given an unforgettable demonstration of God's majesty, splendor, might, and understanding.

Isaiah has this extraordinary experience in the year that King Uzziah of Judah died* (6:1). Isaiah would have seen an obvious contrast between the late king and God. Though for most of his life, Uzziah had been faithful to God, and had been generally a good example to the nation, unfortunately late in his life Uzziah committed some senseless acts of pride, and thus came to a humiliating and shameful end**.

* Approximately 740 BC.

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

By comparison, God's unchanging holiness and purity, his unfailing faithfulness, his complete majesty and his unsurpassed splendor, are now displayed unmistakably for the prophet. The sight of the Lord on his throne (Revelation 4:1-3) gives Isaiah a remarkable image of God that he could remember over the years to follow.

Isaiah describes the sights, sounds, and all of the other sensations he experiences (6:2-4). In this account, the prophet is using human words to describe something beyond human minds and human language to describe adequately, so instead of analyzing the details literally, we will just ponder this scene and what it says about God.

For example, in the description of the seraphim* (or seraphs) as they call to each other (see also Revelation 4:8-11*), consider what their abundance of wings tells us, and then despite their own grandeur, these creatures continue describing the Lord as 'Holy, holy, holy.' These seraphs implicitly call us to consider the extraordinary nature of our God and his heavenly dwelling place.

* Isaiah 6 is the only place in the scriptures where seraphs are mentioned.

** The creatures described in Revelation 4 resemble the cherubim in Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 10. Cherubim (or cherubs) are mentioned a few dozen times in the Old Testament.

The seraphs call to one another with the message that God wants to impress upon the humble prophet: that God is absolutely holy, and that whatever glory we see now in our own world comes only from him. Isaiah will have to go through some tough times in the course of his ministry, but he will never doubt God's strength or God's understanding.

Moreover, the mere sound of the voices of the seraphs shakes the doorposts and the threshold of God's throne room. Then also, the temple fills up with smoke. All of these developments are appropriate in view of God's holiness. Even his seraphs have strength and glory that would humble anyone and anything in this world, and these images also remind us that God and his nature are far more vast and complex than human minds can describe.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What might have been God's reasons for bringing the prophet before him in such a way? What response may God have hoped for? What do each of the images in this scene tell us about God's nature? What can we learn from this about our relationship with God?

Your Sin Is Atoned For (Isaiah 6:5-7)

Overawed by being in God's presence, the prophet at once realizes how unworthy he is to be standing before God. At the moment Isaiah acknowledges his uncleanness, God at once takes it away. Yet even the process of atonement that he undergoes may have been a fearful experience just in itself. So Isaiah will also have this vivid memory of what it means to be cleansed by God.

Isaiah's spontaneous response to these sights and sounds is to cry out, 'woe to me!', for he cannot help realizing the contrast between his mortal, fallible nature and God's divine purity (6:5, see also similar experiences in Exodus 3:2-6, Ezekiel 1:25-28, Revelation 1:12-18). Seeing a glimpse of God's true nature with his own eyes, he feels his own uncleanness, even to sensing that his very lips are unclean in God's sight.

Thus, when the prophet cries out that, 'my eyes have seen the King', this is a heartfelt expression of wonder mixed with true, godly fear, the reverence that comes only when we can 'see' who God really is. Isaiah experiences - and will no doubt never forget - a small taste of what it is like to be in God's presence. Likewise, the more that we truly understand what God is actually like, the more we ourselves shall come to feel humbled and full of admiration as Isaiah is here.

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

Isaiah's sin has been atoned for, he has been made clean so that he may remain in God's presence as God explains what he has in mind for the prophet. Yet it is worth thinking about what would have been involved in having a burning coal thrust into one's face (see also the imagery in Luke 3:15-18). Amongst other things that he learns, Isaiah can now understand that atonement for sins does not come from his own good works.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah react to these surroundings in the way he does? What can we learn from his response? What can we learn from the way Isaiah is cleansed? Does it have any parallels for us today? What does this tell us about God and his nature?

That They May Turn & Be Healed (Isaiah 6:8-13)

God now gives Isaiah the message he is to proclaim. God makes it plain to the prophet that his task will not be an easy one, for he will be speaking to a largely unreceptive audience, and most of them will not respond favorably. So Isaiah will need to walk by faith in God. The message itself shows both God's understanding of human nature and also his eagerness to have our hearts.

Now God asks the rhetorical question, 'Whom shall I send?' (6:8-10). Isaiah's willing response, so often quoted today, is more meaningful in its full context. He is not responding out of excitement, rather he is speaking in reverence, humility, and respectfulness; in his relief and gratitude he is willing to go wherever and say whatever God asks him to. Moreover, God tells Isaiah that from the beginning he will often be speaking to people with closed eyes and hardened hearts.

God's instructions to the prophet seem at first paradoxical, or even confusing, since at first glance it seems as if God wants him to tell people to be blinded and hardened. But the description of them as 'ever seeing, but never perceiving'* is already the case, as it usually is in any era (Matthew 13:14-17). Isaiah will simply bring out into the open the true spiritual condition of the people, to help them see their need for God.

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

For Isaiah's message is one of hope, and it also reflects God's hope that some of those who listen will return to him; it is summarized at the end of verse 10, *'they might see with their eyes . . . and turn and be healed.* Throughout Isaiah, we will see this reflected, as Isaiah's teaching helps us all to see our deep need for God's mercy and compassion and healing every moment. It also teaches us the depths of God's desire for us to turn to him so he may heal us and comfort us.

As Isaiah grasps the significance of what God is calling him to do, he cannot help asking how long this ministry of unpopular preaching will last (6:11-13). Whatever personal apprehension he may have must have been mixed with concern for everyone in Judah and Israel. God does not and cannot tell the prophet anything but the truth: that his message will be proclaimed until the cities lie ruined and the Lord has sent everyone far away.

In the Old Testament, this would take place by the fall of Israel and Judah being defeated and the people taken to exile by Assyria and Babylon. Yet as we so often see in Isaiah, this also looks ahead to the Messiah. Like Isaiah, Jesus knew that he would often speak to people with closed eyes and hardened hearts; and like Isaiah, Jesus first had to help people to understand their need for God, so that they might soften their heart and let God cleanse them and heal them.

As we'll read about the 'remnant' in Isaiah, so Jesus also came to seek the 'remnant' from every nation of those who would listen to his message and open our hearts to him. Even as believers, sometimes we may feel that our hearts and spirits lie in ruins, that we are far away from God, so Isaiah's message reassures us that when seek God with our hearts, he will welcome us back.

Moreover, there is a strong note of hope for the future, as God promises that *'the holy seed will be the stump in the land'*. Here the stump is yet another image of the remnant, the survivors. Isaiah will have to stand by as God chops down the great tree of his people, comforted only by the knowledge that this stump, as Job vividly describes in Job 14:7-9, can be the source of renewed life. Once again, this has many parallels in the coming of Jesus and in his message.

Jesus spoke of rebirth, new life, inward renewal, in scriptures such as John 3 when he helps us understand why we must be born again (John 3:1-12). Like Nicodemus, who simply responded, 'How can this be', it can be hard sometimes to look beyond the surface and look more deeply at what God tells us. The way that Jesus describes what it means to be born of the Spirit helps us to realize that God understands that many of these things are beyond us to fully grasp or describe.

And consider also how understanding and caring God is, that he speaks to us, mere mortal beings, about such heavenly things, in the hope that we may seek him and know him and let him give us the nourishment and healing that our souls need.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What has Isaiah learned about God so far? How would this have influenced his response to God's rhetorical question? Explain in your own words what God says to the prophet in verses 9-10, and then explain why this is meant to be a message of hope. What does the image of the holy seed being the stump mean? What does all this tell us about God's nature and about our walk of faith with him?

- *Mark Garner, July 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

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

In a time of fear in Judah, Isaiah proclaims a message of faith in God and hope for the future. He combines guidance and images with prophecy and explanation, and yet most of the people choose instead to trust in worldly forces. The next several chapters (Isaiah 7-12) also contain some noteworthy Messianic prophecies, which we shall study in their original context.

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

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

This alliance against Judah causes panic in the people and impatience in their king (7:1-2). At the time, Assyria dominated the nations and events of the entire area, and the smaller nations would waver back and forth, sometimes seeking Assyria's favor and sometimes trying to break free from its grip. On this occasion, Aram and Israel join forces, and pressure Judah to join them*.

> * Although it is not stated in Isaiah, the two neighboring nations are attempting to build an alliance against Assyria, which has been extorting large amounts of money from them.

Judah was in the slightly less dangerous position of these smaller nations, as it was the farthest away from Assyrian territory*. Yet Judah's King Ahaz preferred to ally with Assyria, a brutal empire known for its ruthless treatment both of enemies and of its own people. In response, Aram and Israel choose to launch a joint attack on Judah and Jerusalem, precipitating a crisis in Judah**.

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

> ** The date of this situation is approximately 734 BC, a few years after Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6. Because the ancient nations all used dating systems much different than ours, it can be a difficult task to pinpoint an exact date. Many events in Isaiah's lifetime are dated by comparing the Bible's chronology with references from Assyrian chronicles.

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

Isaiah and Shear-Jashub repeatedly reassure the king, telling him to, 'be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid'. The king will not have to resort to alliance with the treacherous Assyrians, for he simply needs to trust God, who is already prepared to protect his people. Isaiah goes even further, foretelling the swift ruin of Ephraim (or Israel, or Samaria)*, and emphasizing the relative weakness of Aram**.

> * Israel was often called Ephraim, since that was the most dominant in the coalition of the northern tribes. In Isaiah's era, its capital was the city of Samaria, so the nation was also often referred to by that name. After this nation fell, over the years, its descendants would become integrated with fragments of other nationalities that settled in the area, and the resulting population would eventually be known as the Samaritans.

** Aram is the ancient name for the nation of Syria, which still exists and has the same capital (Damascus).

As God calls King Ahaz to stand firm in his faith, he understands how hard this can be for us mortal beings. So God graciously offers to grant the weak Ahaz a sign, to give him hope and reassurance. Yet the faithless king brusquely rejects this offer of grace, and he hides his aversion to listening to God with an excuse that sounds spiritual, yet that with him is a sign of a hard heart. God thus uses Isaiah to give the king a sign after all - and it turns out to be a memorable sign.

In the midst of this fear and faithlessness, the sign of Immanuel, 'God with us', is introduced (7:13-17). In words familiar to us from the gospel, Isaiah states that a 'maiden (virgin)* will be with child, and will give birth to a son' (Matthew 1:20-23). Here in Isaiah, this had an immediate importance in addition to its Messianic significance.

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

This is a dual prophecy of the kind that Isaiah often makes, for such a son was born soon after he issued his prophecy (see Isaiah 8:3 below for this short-term, non-miraculous event), and then of course the Scripture finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus*. Since we are already familiar with the Messianic significance, we shall mainly look now at Isaiah's message for King Ahaz.

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

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

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

Questions for Discussion or Study: What choices did Ahaz have in dealing with this crisis? What could we learn from these events? How is Isaiah 7:14 used in the New Testament? How is the Immanuel theme relevant to the situation in Isaiah's era? Does it have any parallel with Jesus as our Immanuel? What does this tell us about God and his nature?

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

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

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

God has prepared Assyria to be his 'razor', which he has 'hired from beyond the river' (here, the Euphrates) to discipline his people if needed. Their heads will be 'shaved' in that the brutal Assyrians need only to be let loose, and they will destroy and seize anything they can. Isaiah adds further imagery to emphasize the peril, depicting a landscape covered only with briers and thorns.

Assyria's power dwarfs that of Israel and Judah, yet its own power is in turn nothing in comparison with God's. So again the prophet is calling all the peoples of the earth to humble themselves before God. At the same time, God reassures those who do end up remaining in the land, that he will still provide sustenance for them despite the bleak conditions.

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

> * Verse 3's reference to 'the prophetess' refers here to Isaiah's wife. The birth of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz was a reminder to keep our faith in God, whereas the birth of Jesus was both a miracle and a spiritual lesson.

The tongue-twisting name given to the prophet's newest son means roughly, 'quick to the plunder', because not long after he is born, Damascus (Aram) and Samaria (Israel, Ephraim) will be helpless when they plundered by Assyria. There is a caution too for Judah, for in trusting in human force, they have also exposed themselves to possible future treachery from Assyria.

In this episode, we can see two aspects of the assurance that God is with us. To the faithful, this is a great encouragement in the midst of trials and danger (Romans 5:8-10). Yet to the faithless, it is a warning that nothing is hidden from God. 'God With Us' promises us a blessing we could never earn or deserve. Yet it also calls us to live reverently and humbly.

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

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

As the king and most of the Judeans panic, Isaiah continues to remind them to rely on God rather than trusting in earthly forces. As God reassures the prophet and exhorts him to remain firm in his faith, his words also encourage us to do likewise. Like Isaiah, faithful believers today are called to have a perspective on events that differs greatly from the viewpoint of the worldly.

Mindful of all that is going on, God reassures Isaiah by helping the prophet to sense the Lord's strong hand upon him (8:11-17). God urges Isaiah not to give in to the worldly perspectives all around him: he should not fear what the worldly fear, but instead remember the nature and the vastness of God (Luke 12:4-7). Nor should he see a grand conspiracy behind all the wrong around him, for the worldly are simply following their fleshly natures by living in disorder and conflict.

God's description of himself as 'a stone that causes people to stumble' (verse 14) is also used (with Isaiah 28:16) of Jesus in Romans 9:30-33. God's glory and his love and his truths are beyond the power of humans to understand fully. His nature often clashes with our fleshly desires, which can cause us to 'stumble' when we are distracted or lured by the world. It can be hard for us to 'wait for the Lord' (verse 17), so God both continues reminding us and reassuring us.

Isaiah says, 'Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me' (8:18-22), recalling the start of his ministry (6:8) and emphasizing the role of his children as visible signs, as living spiritual symbols. Their very names remind the people of God's presence, and are a living call to 'consult God's instruction'. Sadly, most of them will stumble just as God has said. Instead of believing God and his prophet, they will consult false, worldly experts, and will be thrust into darkness.

The 'Immanuel' promise is echoed in Hebrews, when the writer reminds us that Jesus shared in our humanity, that he was made like us in every way (Hebrews 2:11-18). Through Jesus, we are now of the same family; and regardless of what we look like to the world, he is not ashamed of us. Moreover, Jesus understands our deepest needs, and he is able to help us with our deepest needs.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Consider Isaiah's situation - how might we be able to learn from it? Why might God have chosen to use Isaiah's sons as 'signs and symbols'? What does all this tell us about God's nature and about our relationship with him?

- *Mark Garner, July 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

Notes For Week Six: A Light Has Dawned (Isaiah 9:1-10:19)

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

There Will Be No More Gloom (Isaiah 9:1-7)

The vivid contrast between darkness and light, along with the description of the future Messiah, make this scripture one of the most memorable of Isaiah's Messianic prophecies. As we read it in its original setting, a time of fear and worry, we can consider what it meant to people at that time, while also understanding even more deeply what Jesus means for us.

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

As one of the northernmost areas of Israel, Galilee was significantly influenced by Gentile cultures*. It was also on an invasion route used by Assyria and other attackers, and thus usually suffered more than its share of hardship and loss when the nation was disciplined. While we naturally associate Galilee with Jesus, the choice of it as the place thus honored is interesting, since God deliberately avoided any of the more prosperous or more socially influential areas.

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

The image of those walking in darkness seeing a great light is a metaphor for the light that Jesus brings into all of our lives (2 Corinthians 4:5-6). He is the one source of genuine light and truth in a world full of deception and broken promises. Galilee was no more sinful or backwards than other parts of the nation; it only seemed 'darker' to those who thought more highly of themselves than they should have. Every person in the world always stands in equal need of God's light.

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

We ourselves have seen the Messiah, a blessing that Isaiah did not see. So if our earthly dreams are unfilled, recall the many faithful believers - indeed, whole generations of believers - who saw few or no outward results from their labors. Jesus has given us a relationship with God himself,

and we have a certain eternal future to look forward to. Let that be enough for us to devote ourselves faithfully to whatever ministry he calls for us to pursue.

Isaiah also appeals to the yearning to shatter the yokes of oppressors*. Only rarely in their history were the ancient Israelites not threatened by one or more hostile powers. Likewise, believers in Jesus live in a world hostile to our beliefs. Thus the good news of Jesus renders them incapable of pulling us away from him unless we choose to do so ourselves. He also reveals the weak and deceitful nature of this world's powers and authorities, so we need no longer fear them.

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

In this context, we receive the promise that to us 'a child is born' (9:6-7), that 'to us a son is given'. Though this will find its complete fulfillment in the Son born to a couple from Galilee, this child is truly given to all of us (Luke 2:25-32). Since the need is universal, so is the gift. Thus all can rejoice in the names of praise by which he is called - Wonderful, Counselor, Prince Of Peace.

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

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

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What significance is there here to light and darkness? What does the choice of Galilee tell us about God? Why is the promise phrased in terms of the birth of a son? How might this have helped Isaiah's original listeners? What do the names given to the child tell us about him?

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

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

The prophet contrasts their human pride with God's divine discipline (9:8-21). Our pride is unjustified, while God justly disciplines us in love when we refuse to learn what is good for us, especially how patiently and kindly he teaches us (Isaiah 55:2-3, 55:7). Pride is especially destructive to our relationship with God, because our pride blocks out the things he wants to tell us and give us, and blinds us to our sins and our need for grace.

God warns that he will cut off 'both head and tail' from the people. These were two major sources of false hope and false security: the leaders who misled, and the prophets who taught falsehood. Both are problems in any era - power corrupts all who desire it, and leaders in every era quickly learn how easy it is to deceive others. False prophets, likewise, abound in any era. Telling the crowd what it wants to hear is usually a way to worldly popularity and privilege.

Because those of Isaiah's generation so willingly embraced such things, they are barely aware of their desperate need for God. Even after discipling them, God's hand will still be upraised, yet his desire is not to punish, but to cure. The harder our hearts become, and the more closed our minds are, the more firmly he has to discipline us. His hand is upraised, ready reluctantly to impose discipline when needed, and eagerly waiting to lift us up when we turn to him.

The rampant injustice and oppression in Judah was a warning and also another symptom of pride (10:1-4). They had accepted without question the privileges of the wealthy and the powerful, and cared little for the sufferings of the weak and poor. Isaiah's question is appropriate in any era - on the day of reckoning, to whom will we run, for only in God can we find true justice and complete understanding in this callous world (Luke 13:34-35).

As God pronounces woe upon Judah and Israel, he pronounces woe as well to the Assyrians who will discipline them (10:5-11), for their time will be much shorter. The Assyrian agenda included world domination and countless acts of brutality and indulgence, but God's purpose overruled their plans once their usefulness was at an end. Assyria fell never to get up again, while the Israelites would endure difficult times, yet God would lift them back up when they softened their hearts.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Explain why pride is so dangerous spiritually. How did it lead to other problems in Isaiah's day, and how does it lead to other problems in our own times? Why does Isaiah single out the leaders and prophets? How can we see God's compassion or his mercy in this scripture?

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

Regardless of how weak, flawed, or sinful human beings are, God never loses his strength nor his wisdom nor his compassion. When we lose sight of God and look to the world for help, we can never find any lasting source of security or guidance. We should keep God ever at the center of our thoughts and our perspective, so that we can draw confidence from knowing our Creator.

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

The Assyrians - as have those of every nation that has enjoyed a time of dominance - were convinced that the 'gods' had blessed them. They persuaded themselves that they would not be able to enjoy such success unless they deserved it. Ironically, it was not the false gods they

worshiped who allowed them to have these 'blessings', but the living God, who allowed them for a time to rule and dominate in spite of who they were and how they lived, not because of these.

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

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

The prophet depicts God as an unquenchable fire, with nothing able to stand in his path; yet his holy fire was meant to bring cleansing and purification. This was true in Isaiah's day, as the time neared for unavoidable discipline that would end only when God willed. It is true now; and whether we face eternity a few days from now or many millennia from now, God's purposes and his glory and his holiness and his desire for us to know him will be the same forever.

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

As we develop a perspective focused on eternal things, we can begin to understand how God really works in our lives and the lives of others. As we learn to see with the eyes of our hearts' (Ephesians 1:18), we can we appreciate what is truly important, truly glorious, and truly beautiful. Then, despite everything that may happen, we always have God's promise that there will be 'no more gloom'. We have this assurance now, in knowing that our sins are forgiven and our guilt removed.

The message of Jesus is a light shining in a dark place (2 Peter 1:16-19). As Peter so well remembered God telling him, 'This is my Son', so also God has given us this same message, and this message is indeed completely reliable. The good news of Jesus brings dawn to the anxious hearts of those who seek God in truth, and it comforts the spirits of those who walk by faith.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> How could God allow Assyria to have such undeserved power and wealth? How did God help Isaiah and other faithful believers endure watching this? What could we learn from this? What does all this tell us about God's nature and about what it means to follow him?

- *Mark Garner, July 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

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

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

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

There are many times in the Old Testament when the number of believers is reduced considerably. But God always preserves a remnant, a carefully protected group of survivors, which he then uses to build a better future for the Israelites. Isaiah explains how and why this principle works, knowing that God is also planning to use the same idea on a broader and more spiritual level.

The promise of the return of the remnant (10:20-23) ties together several themes that help us understand God's nature and character. Long before Isaiah, God used remnants to rebuild and strengthen the faithful. Noah, Joshua and Caleb, Gideon, and many others illustrate the many ways and times that God has refocused on a small group of believers when the vast majority went astray. Jesus himself drew a remnant from the people of Israel*, those few who accepted the Messiah.

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

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

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

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

Walking by faith can often be hard, and following Jesus may call us to make difficult choices. Yet the promise always remains: God will never forsake us, and he will always preserve a remnant under his care - whether it refers to a small group of people, or to our flickering mustard seed of faith. Moreover, whenever someone turns to Jesus, God will remove the veils and obstacles so that we can better understand what he has done for us (2 Corinthians 3:16-18).

In Isaiah's time, before the remnant could return, there will first be divine discipline. God sometimes had to start over with a smaller group, rather than to endure the Israelites' ongoing

idolatry and pride, no matter how superficially strong they may have seemed to be. In Isaiah's time, this discipline would come from the Assyrians, who embodied the worst of human pride and all its ills.

Yet, though Assyria will be the instrument of harsh discipline, Isaiah calls the faithful not to fear or worry about Assyria in itself (10:24-34). God has already planned to discipline the Assyrians as soon as his purpose for them is accomplished, and the one disciplined last will not be the one who laughs. The Assyrian burden will be necessary, but it will be lifted; the Assyrian yoke will remind them of their need for God, yet he has promised to break it when they turn to him.

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

> * The towns in verses 28-32 figuratively depict the Assyrians marching through Israel and Judah, ravaging the land, then taunting Jerusalem itself - then suddenly being stopped by God himself. This is a metaphor of God's protection even as we endure the attacks of the world and of the accuser.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What other remnants were there before Isaiah's time? What does this say about God? Why will Assyria be permanently judged, but Judah preserved as a remnant? How might a 'remnant' refer to something besides numbers? What do these ideas tell us about our walk with God?

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

Even when everyone seems to have drifted away, and even when a person seems irredeemable, God can always find a 'remnant'. The image of a tree stump is deliberately chosen here, to remind us that it is not our effort or our determination that allows God to do this. Only God can bring forth life out of a dead stump, and only he can transform the very nature of our lives.

Isaiah's prophecy of the fruitful Branch connects the earlier Branch image (from Isaiah 4) with his promise of the remnant (11:1-5). This is ultimately fulfilled by the Messiah, Jesus the Branch from Nazareth, on whom the Spirit rested as a Dove. On him the Spirit rested, full of wisdom and understanding, and also the Spirit of the knowledge and fear (reverence) of the Lord. These are also the ideals that God hopes to instill in his remnant (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Both Judah and Assyria will be stumps, but Assyria will simply rot away after being chopped off. The stump of Jesse* will miraculously produce this faithful Branch, after the remnant has undergone God's divine discipline**. Moreover, God promises that neither he nor his Branch will judge by outward appearances, for as he often reminds us, God looks at the heart.

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

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

Further, the Branch (the Messiah, the Christ) will be a banner for the peoples, that is, a hope for all the nations (11:6-16). Isaiah's memorable images of peace, the wolf and the lamb living together, and the calf and lion co-existing, speak both of the harmony that Jesus alone can bring to diverse groups of believers, and also the inner peace that he alone can give us from the conflicting desires within each of us.

Truly the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea; and believers from every country and culture can 'rally' to Jesus, for anyone can come to him. This extraordinary gathering of exiles points out the nature of the true church of Jesus. It is, by nature and design, a spiritual remnant, a gathering of fugitives and outcasts from the world's empty ways and thinking, an assembly of souls who have personally chosen to follow the Lamb of God.

Moreover, the prophet promises that there is always a highway for those who seek God in truth. They can come from anywhere, even hostile nations like Assyria and Edom and Philistia. What we look like to this world counts neither for us nor against us; for God's highway extends to anyone, anywhere, who seeks him with our hearts. His highway takes us to our God, who can meet needs that this world can never meet.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is the Branch depicted as rising from a stump? What does this tell us about God and his nature? Compare the images here of the Spirit with the description of the Spirit descending on Jesus. What does it mean to 'delight in the fear (reverence) of the Lord'? What kind of peace does God bring to believers? What do the images of God reclaiming a remnant and providing a highway tell us about his nature?

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

This heartfelt song of praise extols God as our one and only source of life and hope. It acknowledges the justice of God's discipline, and praises God for his comfort and salvation. The imagery of water also refers to God as the giver of life, both physical life and spiritual life. Likewise, this song celebrates what God does to save and protect us.

Isaiah expresses the joy of salvation simply for its own sake (12:1-3), and the joy of salvation is accompanied by an awareness of God's holiness. Isaiah fully appreciates what it means to be in God's hands, for he has experienced a glimpse of God's holiness and his desire for us to come to him. In our own relationship with God, we can better appreciate what God has done when we remember that we had strayed (1 Peter 2:24-25), and remember the dangers he has saved us from.

The prophet's expression, 'the wells of salvation', makes use of the frequent symbolism of water as a source of life, renewal, and healing (Revelation 22:1-2). Jesus himself would later use the expression 'living water', as he called the lost to come to him for a life-giving drink of God's grace. Isaiah's imagery often suggests a weary, thirsty traveler who has finally found a source of precious water that can make all the difference (see below for how the image is used in John 4).

Isaiah also praises God for saving us and caring for us (12:4-6). The prophet also tells the nations that the promise is for them too, and he proclaims that the name of the Lord is exalted. The prophet understands that God alone has done 'glorious things', and he also wants us to understand that

God's gift of salvation, the blessing of his presence, and the promise of eternal life, are far more valuable than anything in this world.

In Jesus' memorable conversation with the woman at the well, he uses the imagery of God's wells of living water (John 4:9-14). The moment that Jesus tells her that he can give her living water, the woman is not only intrigued, she eagerly desires to have this gift from God; so she asks Jesus, 'Where can you get this living water?' In response, Jesus knows her heart, so he promises her that this living water can become 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'

> Questions for Discussion or Study: How can we better appreciate the joy of salvation, for its own sake? What qualities of God can help us with this? Why does Isaiah use the image of a well? In Isaiah, we will often see the image of water - what does this image suggest? What does the image of water tell us about God?

- *Mark Garner, July 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

Notes For Week Eight: Surely, As God Has Purposed (Isaiah 13 & 14)

Justice, holiness, righteousness, compassion, and mercy are all integral to God's nature. We'll see them in the next several chapters of Isaiah, as the prophet will proclaim God's messages to some of Israel's neighbors, beginning with Babylon, then a rising power. God's purpose is to give everyone the chance to seek him, so each of us has this choice.

Babylon's Rise & Fall (Isaiah 13:1-22)

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

Isaiah hears 'a noise on the mountains' (13:1-8), because God has already foreseen Babylon's rise and its inevitable fall. Just as Babylon will one day swoop down from the north to discipline Judah and other nations, so also there will be others from faraway lands to defeat Babylon in its turn. Such is God's transcendence that he says to 'wail, for the day of the Lord* is near', though it would not happen for almost 200 years (see also Jesus' thoughts in Matthew 24:32-35).

> * Here, the phrase, 'the day of the Lord' refers to the sudden destruction of Babylon in 538 BC.

A brief overview of Babylonian history can help put into context Isaiah's prophecy about Babylon, as well as the reasons for it. Even in Isaiah's lifetime, the city of Babylon could trace its history back almost 1500 years, to its founding sometime before 2200 BC*. The city first rose to prominence when Hammurabi, one of its kings, established control over most of the Mesopotamian valley, and declared himself the ruler of a Babylonian Empire*.

> * Babylon was founded well before the birth of Abraham.
>
> ** In the first half of the 1700s BC, about the time when Jacob and his family moved to Egypt.

Hammurabi's legal code* was widely influential, and it is one of the earliest comprehensive sets of laws that has been preserved. In this era, Babylon became a successful and influential source of commerce, culture, and government. But after Hammurabi's reign ended, his Empire** began slowly to decline and to lose its power over neighboring regions. The city was sacked and raided by the Hittites shortly after 1600 BC.

> * Some modern writers claim that the Law of Moses was based on the Code of Hammurabi, but the two sets of laws are quite different in nature. The Code is largely concerned with civil conduct and property rights, it favors the rich and important, and it imposes some gruesome penalties. It is historically significant mostly because it is the earliest known example of a set of laws, to which even subsequent kings were subject.
>
> ** Hammurabi's empire is usually called Babylonia, and the same name is often given to the region during the era in which it was ruled by other nations.

After this, Babylon's territory was ruled by various foreign nations, although the city itself retained its significance. In Isaiah's era, Babylonia was under the rule of Assyria, as was most of the region. In 626 BC, Babylon's King Nabopolassar rebelled against Assyria, declaring Babylon to be an

independent Empire*. When Assyria's capital, Nineveh, fell in 612 BC, Babylon had completely replaced Assyria as the region's superpower.

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

Babylon's future fall will seem as if the heavens are trembling (13:9-22). The images of celestial upheaval (*e.g.* the stars and sun darkened) are not literal, but express the feelings of those who will witness the fall of a mighty and seemingly invincible nation. It will feel much the same to the Babylonians, with their sense of false security. The sudden end to their earthly power will be the effect of this 'day of the Lord'.

God already foresees stirring up the ancient nation of the Medes* (who in turn are just one more tool for him to use in due time) to deal with Babylon someday, so that when the time comes there will be no chance for Babylon to survive. The following imagery depicts a city so desolate that only animals occupy it, as an expression of how complete its fall will be.

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

In all this, God has foreseen the trend of events well into the future. He has not, in so doing, taken away any individual's free will - quite the contrary, since Isaiah has so clearly invited anyone, anywhere to become part of the remnant. It is simply not that difficult for God to foresee the general direction of human history.

As God tells Babylon that its time is at hand, this is a reminder for all of us, that it is time for us to turn away from our earthly agendas and ambitions, open our hearts to God, and let him give us the healing and mercy we always need (2 Peter 3:8-11, see also Romans 13:11-12).

> Questions for Discussion or Further Study: Explain how God can foresee the general trend of history without interfering with human free will. Why would Isaiah tell an unbelieving nation of its (then) distant future? What does it mean that the day of the Lord is near, and the time is at hand? What does this tell us about God and his nature? What are we meant to learn from this prophecy about Babylon?

Relief For The Oppressed (Isaiah 14:1-24)

From God's viewpoint, Babylon would turn out to be merely one more rod, one more tool, for God to use. The Judeans would have to endure years of oppression from Babylon, but in the end they would find relief, and would be able to watch mighty Babylon fall while little Judah was restored to life. The imagery in these verses illustrates both sides of this.

This warning of doom for Babylon is also a promise of God's compassion on the house of Jacob, that is, the Israelites (14:1-2). Isaiah pictures God turning the tables, with the Judeans returning to their own land with the assistance of other nations, instead of being oppressed and persecuted as they so often had been. The short-term fulfillment was in the return from exile, when the powerful Persian government would open up their own resources to help rebuild the nation*.

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

The long-term fulfillment of this promise is even more important, through the coming of the Messiah, who would gather believers from every time and place, and take us to a much better land.

Likewise, as we see the relief that Babylon's fall would someday bring, this also refers to the rods and chains that Jesus has broken for us.

In the 'taunt' to the fallen king of Babylon, as the broken rod is remembered, we see both hope and caution (14:3-21). The relief of the oppressed will be so great that Isaiah portrays even the trees celebrating Babylon's collapse. Moreover, as this news brings rest and peace to the down-trodden and afflicted, this is a look ahead to the more lasting rest and peace that Jesus brings to us.

This relief and joy is paralleled by the drastic fall of a powerful nation, and both are magnified by the sudden change in fortunes that Babylon's fall will involve. As Isaiah grimly but truthfully says, the grave awaits even the world's leaders and rulers and famous and wealthy; and when they die, none of their worldly power or privileges will be able to help them at all. This is the prophet's caution for us not to let ambition, success, and pride cloud our view of spiritual reality.

Pride, ambition, and the damage they can cause, are so vividly depicted by Isaiah in verses 12-15 that these verses are sometimes seen as a depiction of Satan*. Yet, in addition to referring to the kings of Babylon and to so many similar human rulers throughout history, they can also apply in a general sense to human nature, as a caution for us not to forget God, not to forget our dependence on him, and not to allow our hearts to become hardened.

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

Truly, as God has planned, so it will be (14:22-24). Yet God's plans and designs transcend earthly nations and earthly matters. Babylon's collapse would be a complete humbling and also an example to everyone. Like Assyria, and unlike Judah or Israel, there would be no future for Babylon, since Babylon and its leaders stood only for their own glory and power.

Yet when we continue following God, even with our bruised mustard seed of faith, we have a future, and we can know that our sufferings need not be fruitless. For what God has purposed has always been all about calling everyone to seek him and find him (Acts 17:26-28).

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah so vividly describe Babylon's fall, and why does God have him write it so long in advance? What parallels are there between Babylon's fall and the ministry of Jesus? What does this tell us about God, and what does it tell us about 'what he has purposed'?

His Hand Is Stretched Out (Isaiah 14:25-32)

Assyria and Philistia had also done more than their share to harm the Israelites. They, like Babylon, often served as God's agents of discipline, yet this didn't excuse the eagerness with which they killed, looted, and destroyed. Yet they too were merely just one part of God's overall design, and again these prophecies discuss something more important than the history of these two nations.

The fate of Assyria that Isaiah pronounces here (14:25-27) re-emphasizes what he has already said about the Assyrians. They will be allowed to rule and dominate for a time, but then their yoke will be taken away from Israel, Judah, and all the others they have oppressed. Assyria was not, and never would be, the focal point of history, but only a very small part of God purposes.

'The plan determined for the whole world' was ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus (Acts 17:29-31). Assyria's ascendancy allowed God to use them to remind believers of their need for him, and (when needed) to discipline the Israelites. Moreover, God's forbearance for the Assyrians (as with also the Babylonians, Egyptians, and others) gave them too the opportunity to seek him and to come to know him.

Isaiah also foretells the fate of Philistia, Judah's long-time neighbors and foes (14:28-32). Isaiah's warning to them not to rejoice prematurely might have been about them celebrating King Ahaz's death*, though it seems more likely it foresees Philistia's callous response to Judah's future fall. The cloud of smoke from the north is Babylon, which later, under King Nebuchadnezzar, would not only conquer Judah, but would also end Philistia's existence as a nation permanently.

* Ahaz's successor, Hezekiah, was a much better king than Ahaz, both spiritually and administratively.

As Isaiah concludes his message to the Philistines, he asks, 'What answer shall be given to the envoys of that nation?' That is, what if a Philistine or an Assyrian or a Babylonian comes to the living God and asks for guidance, how will God respond - and Isaiah tells us that the Lord's response will be that anyone from any nation may seek him and come to God, for he will have compassion on them, and will give them refuge from the world's afflictions and uproars and storms.

Jesus gives a similar answer to John the Baptist's disciples (Luke 7:18-23). Discouraged by events, John sends his messengers to ask Jesus whether he is the One who was to come. Jesus explains that he came to open the eyes of the blind and to open the eyes of our hearts; he came to heal those with leprosy and to heal us inwardly. All of us are weak and blind and confused, so Jesus calls us all to come to him. Blessed indeed are those who do not stumble over our gracious Savior.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: As Isaiah depicts the fate of Assyria and Philistia, what indications of God's compassion can we see? Explain Isaiah's response to any Philistines who ask him for a message. What do we learn about 'the plan determined for the whole world'? What does this tell us about God and his spiritual purposes and his nature?

- *Mark Garner, July 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT: STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

Notes For Week Nine: A Throne Established In Love (Isaiah 15, 16, & 17)

Continuing his series of messages about the various nations of his era, Isaiah cautions Moab and Damascus (that is, Aram, or Syria) that God may discipline them soon. Moab's pride keeps them from seeking God, while God tells both Damascus and Israel that they are trusting in the wrong things. Yet again we see God's eagerness to show mercy, and his hope that they will turn to him.

The Grass Is Withered (Isaiah 15)

Like so many nations and individuals, Israel's neighbor Moab* was filled with pride and false confidence. But Isaiah warns Moab that destruction can come upon the country quickly. Yet, as he describes the devastation of Moab, he is also describing the spiritual desolation that occurs inside anyone who drifts away from God and relies on human strength and earthly possessions.

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

The prophet describes Moab's leading cities being destroyed in a night (15:1-4) to emphasize its vulnerability in spite of outward appearances. Using an image we have seen before (see Isaiah 7:20), the prophet depicts Moab as a nation in which every head has been shaved, and every beard cut off, as images of its weakness and futility, and of the complete humbling that will come. Thus the message to Moab is also a message about human nature.

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

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

Moab had an uneasy history with the Israelites; for example, the Old Testament describes David defeating Moab (2 Samuel 8:2), and later an unsuccessful Moabite attack against Israel (2 Kings 3:1-27), in which Judah helped to defend Israel. Later, Moab joined Babylon in an attack on Judah (2 Kings 24:2), not long before Judah's final fall.

The nation of Moab passes from history during the sixth century BC, and by the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem the Moabites are no more*. While the nation was not prominent enough for ancient historians to record its final fall precisely, the historical record implies that its end came in the same era that Judah and Jerusalem fell.

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

As Isaiah depicts Moab's flight and lamentation, we also see how God's heart cries out over Moab (15:5-9). With considerable detail, he describes how the cities will be destroyed and important

sources of water dried up. Yet these details, along with descriptions such as the grass withering so that nothing green is left, are meant more figuratively than literally, reflecting a land in which all signs of (spiritual) life has been extinguished.

Moab's considerable wealth will be carried away (see below), and the fugitives from Moab's fall will desperately look for someplace to flee, a reminder of the need we all have to find refuge in God. The images of having nothing left to eat are also a vivid reminder of how little satisfaction we can take from this world's things, yet as in the well-known parable (Luke 15:17-20) our Father in heaven is always waiting to give us what we needed all along.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: How does Moab's plight parallel needs in our own lives? Despite the Moabites' misdeeds (see also below), why does God lament for them? What does this tell us about God and his nature?

Shelter For The Moabite Fugitives (Isaiah 16)

Moab's values and perspectives clashed sharply with God's. The nation took false security in itself and in the things it produced, and the Moabites sought to find contentment in the wrong things. God saw them differently, and he disciplined them so that they might turn to him; and moreover, when they do, he promises to give them the spiritual nourishment they need.

Even as Isaiah describes the confusion and fear that will accompany the fall of Moab, he also promises the coming of "one who in judging seeks justice" (16:1-5). Like birds thrust from their nest, the Moabites do not know what to do, and can think only of finding some kind of shelter. As Moab's fugitives desperately seek refuge, God is already waiting to show them compassion, in the hope that some of them will look to him instead of trusting in earthly things.

God has always wanted to give the Moabites, the Israelites, and everyone else, what we really need. The world assigns blame and it fights about meaningless things, yet God is faithful, his justice is very different from human justice, and his righteousness and his compassion are everlasting. God's priority is spiritual health, not physical strength or material possessions.

Anyone in Moab who understands what matters most to God, and who seeks God in truth will be welcomed and will find refuge and for their souls, and can share in the spiritual blessings and nourishment that God rejoices in giving those who walk by faith (Luke 6:37-38). And indeed, Jesus has now come to establish a new 'throne' and a new kingdom and a new covenant for everyone who recognizes his voice and follows him.

Likewise, Moab's pride and boasting simply reflect what human nature is like if we drift away from God (16:6-14). The nation's apparently secure position, its material prosperity, and its economic usefulness* made the Moabites feel as if they were special. They did not consider it likely that their nation would ever fall, and they felt as if they had earned these blessings.

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

The lament for the raisin cakes* of Kir Hareseth is a reminder to focus on what really matters. When this town falls, the response will be one of concern over the loss of these delicacies, rather than caring about the anguish that the people there would undergo. This concern for trivial things is human nature, so this image is meant to remind us again of what is important to God, both in others' lives and in our own.

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

Likewise, God's lament over the Moabites' hearts is echoed throughout the scriptures, for it reflects God's sadness, not fury, over those who reject him and resist his words (Matthew 23:37). Isaiah's description of Moab's despair, and its desperation to change things by meaningless rituals, are reminders for us that God alone is a sure foundation.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Describe the feelings the Moabites will experience when the nation falls. How do they reflect their (and our) need for God? What can we learn from them? What does God want to give the Moabites? What does this tell about God, and what can we learn from it today?

Turn Your Eyes To The Holy One (Isaiah 17)

Isaiah again discusses Damascus (the capital of Aram, or Syria), which he also had addressed during the crisis of 734 BC. At that time it had joined with Israel's idolatrous king to attack Judah, so here he links Aram's troubles with those of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Yet again he isn't punishing them for punishment's sake, rather he is giving them too a chance to turn to God.

Again we see the phrase, "In that day . . . ", which takes on an extra meaning beyond the original setting (17:1-9). The message to Damascus is relatively short (verses 1-3). Here, Isaiah briefly describes the desolation that Damascus and the Arameans will face*. He makes the ironic comment that Aram's glory will be that of the Israelites, when Israel's glory is just about to fade.

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

As Isaiah then addresses Israel itself, we see again some of the prophet's common themes. His reminder that human glory will fade is for both to unbeliever and believer alike (see Isaiah 2:17-19). Yet here we also see the promise that some gleanings will remain, a remnant, as if taken from a field already harvested. Here we see God's desire to give them another chance to return to him so that he may renew them.

In that day they will look to their Maker, they will turn their eyes back on God, and they will set aside their idols and the world's false hopes (see also Isaiah 10:20-21). So again we see the purposes of God's heart, as he continues to reach out his hand, as he waits patiently for us to let him give us what our souls need.

As Isaiah reproaches Israel for forgetting God, at the same time he is showing them the way back.

God simply wants us to open our hearts, to learn what it means to depend on him, to trust in him, to get to know him better so we may learn to love and revere him; he wants us to remember that he alone is the Rock, our only true source of meaning and truth and contentment.

The prophet then contrasts these things with the raging of the nations, as their plotting and scheming for wealth, power, and glory, continues through every era of human history (verses 12-14). These often seem fearful and distressing, and we may at times get caught up in them, yet the prophet reminds us that all of these will someday pass, that they will be driven away like tumbleweeds whenever God wills it.

Moreover, God has already driven away the tumbleweeds that most endangered our souls (Colossians 2:13-15), and Jesus did this not with earthly weapons nor with threats nor with force. Isaiah continually reminds us that nothing in this world can save us, and nothing in this world can meet our truest and deepest needs. But God can, and he will do it.

Just as these messages to the nations reassure us, God sows his seed everywhere (Luke 8:4-8). He scatters his seed on the hardened path, on the rocky ground, among the thorns, and in every kind of soil in any place and at any time. God looks beyond these appearances, and Jesus gives us his gentle call, whoever has ears, let them hear.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Isaiah connect Damascus and Israel in this chapter? Is there anything we can learn from this? What does the image of gleanings tell us about God and his purposes? What does it mean to turn our eyes to God? What does it mean to forget God? If this happens, how can we handle it? How does God drive away 'tumbleweeds' in our lives?

- *Mark Garner, August 2018*

THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY FOR THE REMNANT:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 1-19

Notes For Week Ten: They Will Acknowledge The Lord (Isaiah 18 & 19)

Isaiah next addresses Cush and Egypt, two of the world's oldest civilizations. In this era, these nations had been sheltered from Assyria and Babylon, so they had developed a false sense of security. Yet even as the prophet warns them, we again see God's desire to give them the chance to know him, and we also see God's understanding of humanity and our needs.

The Land Of Whirring Wings (Isaiah 18)

As God looks at Cush's restlessness and ambitions, he sees something different. Where the world sees frantic activity and ambitions, God sees futility and emptiness. Where the world is impressed by outward appearances, God sees our need for him. This message to Cush* is a metaphor for how God watches patiently as we pursue human plans, waiting for us to turn to him.

> * Usually spelled Cush in most Bible versions, although Kush is probably more accurate historically.

Isaiah's message to Cush (18:1-7) comes when that nation's strength was near its height, and (by 715 BC) it established dominance over its neighbor Egypt. Isaiah's evocative phrase, 'the land of whirring wings' refers to the large and numerous insects inhabiting the Nile region, where both Egypt and Cush were located, and figuratively are symbolic of the frantic political and diplomatic activity in the region.

As their human leaders and rulers competed with one another, the Cushites also sought to play a major role in the diplomatic and military activities taking place in the sensitive areas around Judah. All of this seemed vitally important to everyone at the time, but to God it was as insignificant as the whirring of insects' wings. Isaiah imagery of sending envoys in papyrus (paper) boats further emphasizes the contrast between appearances and what we need (Matthew 6:11-13).

Cush (or Kush) was one of the nations arising from the ancient Nubian civilizations along the Nile Valley, which are among the oldest known in human history. Over time, the Egyptians came to rule over the Lower Nile (the portion closest to the ocean) while the Cushites established their kingdom along the Upper Nile, to the south*, and expanded from there. For centuries, Cush and Egypt battled for dominance in the region, with Cush holding the upper hand during Isaiah's time.

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

Although it soon lost its dominance over Egypt, Cush continued for several centuries afterward, generally known in ancient history as Ethiopia*, the name given to it by the Greeks**. During Isaiah's era, the nations of Cush, Egypt, and Assyria had many interactions with one another, while Judah (and Israel) found itself caught in the middle. This is reflected by Cush's eagerness to send envoys abroad, especially to a land 'divided by rivers' (referring to Mesopotamia).

> * Note that this should not be directly equated with the present-day nation of Ethiopia (known historically as Abyssinia), although there are some historical connections between the two.
>
> ** The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a Cushite. 'Candace' (or Kandake), mentioned in Acts 8:27 as his ruler, is a title that the Cushites traditionally used for their queen or empress.

In contrast with the restlessness of human nature, God remains patient and quiet, looking on from his dwelling place, bearing with the fruitless strivings and empty ambitions of earthly nations, waiting for us to let him kindness and renewal, like a gentle rain shower after a long, hot day (John 6:35-37). God has compassion for the Cushites, and longs to give them peace and kindness.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What do the images in verse 1-2 tell us about human nature? What do the images in verse 4 tell us about God and his nature? What are the 'gifts' brought to the Lord in verse 7? What can we learn from this message?

The Lord Rides On A Swift Cloud (Isaiah 19:1-15)

The imagery of God's splendor contrasts sharply with the prophet's description of Egypt's weakness and pretensions. Yet again, this message is not only about Egypt, for it is about human nature; and it is about the ways that this world's hopes continually attract us, only to let us down. As Isaiah calls Egypt to turn away from these things, the message is for us too.

In this prophecy, we see again the image of 'the Lord is coming', here to Egypt (19:1-15). The image of God 'riding on a swift cloud' illustrates his splendor and his majesty, in contrast with the weakness and vulnerability of Egypt. Even though they were weak, the Egyptians still saw themselves as a world power whose name made other nations tremble. So here Isaiah depicts Egypt's idols (the things they put their hope in) trembling as their ineffectiveness is revealed.

As the prophet details, Egypt was beset by internal rivalries and external threats, yet the imagery of waters drying up and plants withering is a reminder that the root problem is a dependence on themselves, instead of seeking God. Thus Egypt's foolish 'wise men' helped the rest of the Egyptians delude themselves into a false sense of security (Colossians 2:8-9). All of these cautions are meant for us too, so that we will remember our need for God and remain close with him.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: How is God described here, and what does it imply about him? In contrast, how is Egypt described, and how does this apply to us? What does this message tell us about God and our need for him?

In That Day . . . (Isaiah 19:16-25)

Even when disciplining unbelievers, God’s desire is never punishment or destruction for their own sake. At all times, God seeks for us to acknowledge him as the only living God. God knows that in any place, any time, there can be souls who seek him from the heart, and he promises us that whenever someone seeks him and reaches out for him, God will make himself known to them.

After the somber cautions, the prophet now gives us the encouraging vision of God making a highway from Egypt to Assyria, gathering those who acknowledge him (19:16-25). Some parts of this passage may at first seem difficult to understand*, yet when we realize that many of these details are not meant to be taken literally, and that it is in large part a Messianic prophecy, we can see the emphasis on God's care for everyone in every nation.

> * For example, the 'five cities' in verse 18 are probably not meant to be literal. Some commentators think that this takes the image from Joshua 10, where five cities (or kings) symbolized overall conquest. More likely, the number five has no literal significance, and Isaiah is simply saying that in the Nile region there will be a fair number of persons who come to worship the living God.

We also see the prophet calling for the 'fear of the Lord', the awareness of God's vastness and our dependence on him every moment, and the reverence for who God is (Hebrews 12:28-29). Then, Isaiah tells us that there will be an altar in the heart of Egypt, an image of those who turn to Jesus, acknowledge him, and worship the living God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), for the Lord promises to make himself known to those who seek him with our hearts.

When Egyptians and Assyrians humbly turn to God, it will of course not be as nations, but as individuals* - and it is no less encouraging for that. Here again we see the image of the remnant, the survivors, the gathering of exile from everywhere, the collection of gleanings in unexpected places, as Isaiah makes clear that God has always desired to give salvation and blessing to everyone in the world who seeks him in spirit and in truth.

> * Acts 2 mentions both Mesopotamians (2:9) and Egyptians (2:10) as being in the crowd at Pentecost.
>
> As a historical note, Judaism would later become well-established in Egypt, and in particular it would become an important part of the education and cultural sphere in the great city of Alexandria. Christianity too would have many followers in Egypt, and in early Christianity the congregation at Alexandria would rise to become one of the strongest and most influential congregations.

'In that day', Jesus made this highway from Egypt to Assyria and to the distant lands of the earth. Truly blessed is everyone who follows Jesus, whether from Egypt, Assyria, Israel, or anywhere, for we are no longer citizens of any earthly nation; instead our citizenship is in heaven, where God has written our names in the book of life.

Jesus is a shepherd for the nations, a shepherd who gathers his sheep from every 'sheep pen' (Revelation 7:9-12). This multitude comes from every nation and language, God has cleansed them and gives them inner peace. Salvation indeed belongs to God and the Lamb; it does not come from human thinking or human strength, rather it comes from God's deep understanding and his unfailing compassion and his desire for us to know him.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> What kind of 'fear' does God want us to have? What is the meaning of the image of a highway, and why does the prophet use it? How does it compare with the use of the same image in Isaiah 11:16? What do these images tell us about God and about our walk with him?

- *Mark Garner, August 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week One: Morning Is Coming (Isaiah 20, 21, & 22)

So far, Isaiah has told us about God's promise that there will be a 'highway' for those who seek him at any time and from any place. In this next section, the prophet will explain how God is the sure foundation for our times, whether they are calm or chaotic. We will need this sure foundation as we face the world's disappointments, sorrows, distractions, and snares.

How Then Can We Escape? (Isaiah 20:1-21:5)

Here God again reminds us of the futility of relying on earthly force and human strength to protect us from spiritual dangers. God has Isaiah depict this vividly by having the prophet walk around barefooted and with little clothing. As the Assyrians used to do this to their captives, this is also the state we are in when we trust in ourselves instead of in God.

Before God builds the 'highway' through Jesus, he wants us to acknowledge our weakness, as Isaiah emphasizes himself by being a living example (20:1-6). By walking in public without shoes to protect his feet and barely clad to protect himself from the elements, Isaiah is reproaching Judah for taking a worldly approach to current events, since Judah and its rulers were looking to Egypt and Cush as their protectors against the increasingly dangerous Assyrians.

Even from an earthly perspective, this was a dubious hope, since it would be much easier for Assyria to attack Judah than for the African nations to defend it - yet it was an even bigger mistake spiritually. So after an Assyrian raid on the Philistine city of Ashdod (in 711 BC), God calls Isaiah to spend the next three years living this way to illustrate the weakness of trusting in human strength and earthly nations instead of following God.

On a historical level, the weakness of Egypt and Cush was drastically revealed in 671 BC (some time after Isaiah's death), when a brutal Assyrian raid of the Nile region was followed by a long procession of mostly unclothed prisoners taken captive to Assyria. The procession passed through Judah, so that the Judeans could 'see what happened to those we relied on' (Luke 6:47-49).

This was a vivid reminder that the same kind of disappointment awaits all who trust in worldly force, leaders, or wealth to solve their problems or to make them feel more secure. The prophet thus asks the rhetorical question, 'how then can we escape?'. Since relying on strong nations has proven useless, this is a reminder that the only way we can escape spiritual foes is by trusting in God himself, and the only way we can find lasting meaning is in knowing God.

This is followed by a message to 'the Desert by the Sea'*, depicted as having whirlwinds sweeping through (21:1-5). Setting aside the historical meaning, this is also an image of how we can be tossed around spiritually when we trust in the wrong things. Isaiah describes this as a dire vision, both because as a caring believer he is sad when people suffer, and as a faithful prophet he is distressed by the realization that most of the people around him do not and will not trust God.

> * The geographical and historical meaning of this phrase is uncertain, and commentators have suggested many possibilities. They also usually imply that these few verses are quite difficult to interpret historically, so we'll just look at the figurative meaning.

Even as his audience hears about the problems, they still set their tables with lavish food, gorge themselves and drink as much as they can. This image was echoed much later in the New Testament's reminders to fix our eyes on eternal things.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Explain why God made Isaiah go about in such a vulnerable manner. What does this imagery suggest to us? What should the prophet's rhetorical question, 'How then can we escape?" mean to us? What do the whirlwinds (21:2) suggest, and what is the image saying to us? What can we learn from these verses about God and our need for him?

And The Lookout Shouted (Isaiah 21:6-17)

As this series of visions continues, we continue to see both God's warnings and his promises. Here the image of a lookout has a dual meaning, for it not only reminds the Israelites to look at things from God's viewpoint, it also is a promise of the renewal and guidance that Jesus would bring. Then, the curious message to Edom reminds us to remain alert during this world's trials.

With the somber warnings we've seen, the advice to post a lookout on the watchtower (21:6-10) makes a lot of sense. In addition to the more obvious meaning, it also foresees the coming of Jesus, a completely trustworthy lookout who tells us the truth about spiritual matters. Thus the lookout's report not only tells of the historical fall of Babylon, but also that Jesus has toppled Babylon and its idols by exposing the futility of the world's thinking on the cross.

The next message is addressed to Edom (poetically called here "Dumah", a play on words*), and begins by posing the question, 'Watchman, what is left of the night?' (21:11-12). Here Isaiah portrays the Edomites as anxiously watching events around them, fearing that they too may be harmed in the confusion. On a historical level, the enigmatic answer of the Edomite watchman acknowledges simply that they are helpless in the face of larger and more powerful forces.

> * Dumah means silent, perhaps admonishing the Edomites to remain silent, or perhaps depicting Edom's helplessness.

The response, 'morning is coming, but also the night' is in part a reminder that good things and bad things will always happen in this world. Yet it has a deeper meaning as it applies to Jesus' ministry, when he came to be a light for a while, and called us to walk in his light (John 12:35-36). The added comment to 'ask and come back yet again' reminds us the persistence with which we want things to be different, yet this world will not change - yet, fortunately, God doesn't change either.

The message to Arabia* warns the Arabians of coming trouble as well (21:13-17), though they would not suffer invasion, destruction, or captivity as some of the other nations would. Instead, they would suffer economically because of their reliance on trade with these other nations. So instead of profiting, the prophet advises them to bring water for the thirsty, and to provide food for the fugitives.

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

It is also a reminder of how fragile and temporary the things of this world are. As these tumultuous events loom, God hopes that some of the Judeans will turn their hearts back to him, he hopes that some Edomites and Babylonians realize their need for the living God, and he hopes that some of the Arabians will soften their hearts and be charitable to the fugitives, and to learn about God.

Moreover, it again foretells the coming of Jesus, who would provide the spiritual nourishment we need. Likewise, it is a call to all of us today, believers and unbelievers alike, to not become pre-occupied with worldly events, worldly crises, and worldly goals, and to fix our eyes on Jesus and learn from him. God's ways and his thoughts are indeed far higher than ours.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: In what sense is Jesus a lookout (or a watchman)? Explain how he has overthrown Babylon and its idols. What can we learn from the watchman's response in verse 12? How can we apply the advice to Arabia? What does this series of messages tell us about God and our walk with him? How can we let God help us to accept his will and his ways?

The Valley Of Vision (Isaiah 22:1-25)

The prophet again gives Jerusalem a warning, yet this one goes deeper. Isaiah calls for no less than a complete adjustment of perspective, urging the people to learn the right lessons from the things they see and know. He then uses two particular individuals (two palace stewards) as living examples of this message.

The prophet warns the residents of Jerusalem that their worldly revelry can change to terror before they realize what is happening (22:1-14). They have come to take God for granted as a protector and provider, and have come to think they deserve this, no matter how they behave. Jerusalem was on a hill, so Isaiah's phrase, 'Valley Of Vision' contradicts the physical facts, just as Jerusalem has taken on an identity opposite of what God intended.

Again we see the phrase that the Lord Almighty 'has a day', this time a day for them to see things clearly. Vision means to see things clearly, not daydreaming; vision means to see things just as they are, not as we want them to be. God also wants them to reverse their perspective from the physical and temporary to the spiritual and eternal (Hebrews 3:1-4). Given the condition of the Judeans' hearts, he warns them that this will only come about through discipline.

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

> * See 2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chronicles 32:2-4. The aqueduct was an impressive engineering feat for the time.
>
> ** Jerusalem's water source was the Gihon spring, east of the city and outside its walls. Earlier, an overhead conduit connected the city with the spring, so that the residents did not have to leave the safety of the city walls to get water. But in times of siege, an enemy might be able to cut off the city's water by damaging the exposed conduit. Hezekiah's project eliminated this danger.

Jerusalem's attitude of "Let us eat and drink . . . ", ignoring or denying their serious spiritual needs, incurs God's reproach. Their pride in being 'Gods people', their pride in their 'strong' city, and their pride in outward appearance were no different, spiritually, than the pride for which Moab, Babylon, and Egypt would also be disciplined. The prophet's warning that their sin would never be atoned for* is not meant literally, rather it emphasizes the depths of their pride.

> * In saying this, it is implicit that God realizes the unlikeliness of their repentance. If they do humble themselves, they will then have a chance to receive atonement.

To illustrate this on an individual level, Isaiah compares two palace stewards (22:15-25). The prophet uses a simple replacement of one official as an example of what matters to God when it comes to more important matters. The steward at the time, Shebna*, is reproved for his presumption and pride, for he is taking liberties with the king's palace. Though he considers himself a 'mighty man' (verse 17), he will be 'hurled away', that is, demoted from his position.

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

In contrast with this is Eliakim*, who will replace him. Isaiah refers to him as a peg driven into a firm place, the kind of servant who can be counted on to put his responsibilities first, not himself. So the previous peg, which appeared to have been firm, will be sheared off. Eliakim will be given 'the key to the house of David', that is, his responsibilities will include who enters and leaves the king's palace; and God will be with him and will guide him.

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

A similar image is used in a much deeper sense in Revelation, when Jesus, 'him who holds the key of David', writes to the long-suffering yet faithful church of Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13). Like the Philadelphians, we have little strength and we have little understanding, so Jesus has unlocked the door to God that we couldn't have opened, and no one can shut it, so that anyone may come to him and receive the mercy and understanding and care that we need.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Explain the meaning of the 'Valley Of Vision' as it applied to Jerusalem. What can we learn from this? What does Isaiah want the Judeans to learn from the reservoir? What can we learn from this? What can we learn from the contrast between the two stewards? What does this chapter teach us about God's nature and what it means to know God?

- *Mark Garner, September 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Two: Wonderful Things Planned Long Ago (Isaiah 23:1-25:5)

In these chapters, the prophet calls us to consider what God is doing on an even larger scale. Isaiah reminds us that the entire earth is of a temporary, fragile nature, a basic truth that holds many implications. This can be a sobering truth, yet at the same time it also gives us hope; and it is also a call to develop a broader perspectives on our lives in this world.

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

The wealthy, prominent city of Tyre indeed fit Isaiah's description of it as 'the marketplace of the nations'. Amongst all the places that Isaiah's oracles mention, Tyre held a unique position. While all of the other cities and nations competed bitterly with one another, they all wanted Tyre to remain secure, successful, and prosperous, since they all hoped to benefit from this.

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

> * Tarshish (also mentioned in the book of Jonah) was known to ancient history as Tartessus, a mining region on the easte coast of Spain. It was rich in metal deposits, especially silver and tin. Since Tartessus was a long distance from most of the major nations, its prosperity depended on shipping, Tyre's specialty.

Tyre was an influential Phoenician city. Located on the coast about 100 miles north of Jerusalem*, for centuries it was the center of maritime trade for a large part of the world. It was home to a large harbor and extensive warehouses, and conducted all aspects of international trade. As we discuss Tyre, consider the figurative parallels, since this is what Isaiah's message is really about.

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

Tyre's geographical situation was largely secure, for Tyre was in essence two different cities. A strip of settlements along the mainland coast provided a constant supply of timber and fresh water to the main city, which was located on a fortified island. Like so many other nations Isaiah has mentioned, Tyre and its citizens took pride in their wealth, and they felt that they deserved it. So Isaiah tells us that 'the Lord Almighty planned . . . to bring down her pride' (verse 9).

Tyre's long period of decline began with a 13-year siege at the hands of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. Tyre withstood the siege, yet at great cost, and Nebuchadnezzar imposed severe conditions for breaking off the siege. Then, not long after Isaiah's day, Tyre gradually lost its independence, and it was finally conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BC*. Afterwards it slowly faded into obscurity.

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

Isaiah also foresaw a figurative 'comeback' for Tyre (23:15-18). Historically, Tyre never came close to regaining its former wealth or prominence. So Isaiah is not proclaiming a return to fame of the physical city of Tyre, but rather a thematic truth about the human world. With Tyre brought

low, the nations simply found other cities and other nations to take its place in finance and commerce, and to sing the song of the 'prostitute', that is, to sing the praises of the world's ways.

Likewise, when the prophet says that the wealth of the 'new' Tyre will be set apart for the Lord, rather than being hoarded by the materialistic, this also is not a literal prophecy* but a spiritual truth. Those with material wealth in this world do not really own it at all, and in their hearts they know that they cannot enjoy it forever, which drives the worldly to strive unthinkingly for more, even when they already have more than they need or deserve.

> * Though it is partially reflected in, for example, God moved Cyrus of Persia to finance the return to Judah (see Ezra 1).

Instead, the faithful can gratefully enjoy their temporary possessions on this earth, without craving more and without envying others. The faithful believer who appreciates what we have, instead of complaining about what we don't have, is far richer than an unbeliever with mansions full of worldly wealth (Philippians 4:12-13)

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What current lessons can we learn from Isaiah's prophecy about Tyre? What does Tyre's 'comeback' mean? Explain how the wealth of this new 'Tyre' will be set apart for God. What does this chapter tell us about God's character?

Glory To The Righteous One (Isaiah 24:1-23)

Isaiah's series of warnings now reaches a climax, as he indicates that God's discipline is not limited to the finite series of oracles that Isaiah has given. Rather, this entire world is fallen, fragile, and is ultimately destined to disappear. This realization helps us put into perspective what we read in Isaiah and in the rest of God's Word.

It is a sobering but undeniable truth that one day the entire earth will be laid waste (24:1-13)*. We constantly see portions of the earth devastated by wars, natural disasters, accidents, and the like, yet it can be hard for mortal humans to understand the real lessons that this holds. Despite the best efforts of the world's minds and authorities, this planet will never be a safe, perfect world. No one, nowhere, no time, is ever safe from earthly dangers.

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

Neither famous nor obscure, neither poor nor rich, are exempt from this world's problems, no one is exempt from physical death, and everyone will someday face God. This earth, for all the good things in it, was never meant to be permanent, and the whole earth has long been defiled and cursed by human sin, so it will be replaced by better, lasting, eternal things.

God's desire is to give us a joy that lasts, not earthly fun or even 'happiness', which do not last. So as we undergo the trials of this world, the prop tells us that it will 'be as when gleanings are left (verse 13; see also Isaiah 17:5-6). All of the discipline God allows us to endure, the worst of times we must go through in this world, are never punishment for punishment's sake.

From the ends of the earth, God calls everyone to seek him so that we may know him (24:14-23), and from the ends of the earth the song of the faithful can be heard from those who acclaim the splendor and glory of the Lord our God (Revelation 5:9). Instead of singing the world's old songs about wealth and fame and meaningless pleasures, we sing the new song of the good news of Jesus.

So someday the floodgates of the heavens will be opened (verse 18), when eternal reality is revealed and made known. All we now see and touch is impermanent, existing for a while by God's grace. Even the moon and the sun will be overshadowed when God's full glory and splendor are finally known. The upheavals that Isaiah predicts for the nations of his time, as well as the traumas and tragedies of our own era, merely foreshadow the world's final end.

The faithful may rejoice in knowing with certainty that something far better than this world awaits us. The faithless may groan at the thought of all they have and all they desire disappearing at a stroke, yet the door remains open for them too. The Lord will indeed reign with great glory.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: How does the earth being laid waste connect with the remnant and other themes Isaiah has taught so far? Why does he go into such lavish detail about the earth being broken up and destroyed? What are we meant to learn from this? What does this tell us about God's nature and what matters to him?

A Shelter From The Storm (Isaiah 25:1-5)

God's cautions and his discipline may at time seem harsh or painful, even for believers, yet these are an essential part of our time in this world. For God has done wonderful things that he planned long ago. Thus God's sternness in dealing with humanity is part of his compassion, so that we may receive and understand the best and most lasting of his blessings.

The Lord is our God, and Isaiah reminds us that God planned these things planned long before even Isaiah's time (25:1-5). God's priorities have never changed, and he has known our needs since before we were created, he planned all along to send his Son to redeem us and to show us the depths of his compassion. God acts in perfect faithfulness; God is consistent in all things: in his values, in his priorities, in his nature, in his understanding, in his purity, in his truthfulness.

Bringing low the 'fortified towns', humbling the proud and those who think they are strong, is always part of the way that God deals with humanity. Isaiah says that the fortified town will become a ruin, and that the stronghold will never be rebuilt, to illustrate how God can humble humanity by taking away the worldly things that give us a false sense of security and meaning, so that we may turn to him and realize our need for God to be with us every moment.

God also provides an ever-present refuge for the poor and weak (1 Corinthians 1:27-31). Indeed, we are all weak, confused, lame, and blind, yet we can always be assured, even if the world considers us outcasts and exiles and strangers, when we acknowledge our need for him, that God is the one place where all are loved and welcome.

Jesus himself reminded us that he came to be with the weak and sinful, he came to help us when we realize our need for him (Matthew 9:9-13). Jesus tells us that just as God desires mercy rather than sacrifices, Jesus came to forgive us and to heal our spiritual wounds.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What does the prophet mean by God's 'faithfulness'? How is bringing down the proud part of his faithfulness? How is providing refuge for the weak part of his faithfulness? What wonderful things planned long ago is Isaiah talking about? What do these verses tell us about God and our walk with him?

- *Mark Garner, September 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Three: The Lord Himself Is The Rock Eternal (Isaiah 25:6-26:21)

As Isaiah continues discussing God's promises and his purposes, we continue to see some key themes. He again emphasizes God's unchanging nature, and he reminds us of the contrast between God's understanding and human knowledge. He also reminds us not to trust in human plans or human will power, and instead to trust in God himself, who is indeed the Rock eternal.

On This Mountain (Isaiah 25:6-12)

As the prophet tells us that God has prepared a spiritual 'feast' for us, he uses the image of the mountain that we saw earlier in Isaiah 2. These promises also find their complete fulfillment in the Messiah. On this mountain, he gives us the gift of knowing God. On this mountain, he has overcome the world. On this mountain, Jesus has humbled human pride and pretensions.

Surely this is our God, as Isaiah tells us how the Lord will bless and renew those who trust in him (25:6-12). Returning to one of his recurring images, the prophet tells us that "on this mountain"* God will provide a rich feast. This 'feast' also connects back to Isaiah 23:18, where he promised that the wealth of the 'Tyres' of the world would become blessings for the faithful. So again, it is not a promise of literal feasting, but of the surpassing joys that come with knowing God forever.

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

As God removes the 'veils' when we turn our hearts to him, so we may see him more clearly (see 2 Corinthians 3:15-17), Jesus has also destroyed the shroud that enveloped humanity. For he has swallowed up death itself on the cross (see also 1 Corinthians 15:54-57); the hand of Jesus can remove with the tears caused by the sadness of not knowing God, and his hand consoles when we mourn over the world's sadness.

In Jesus we have found a true and lasting hope; for indeed when we trusted in him, he saved us from spiritual death and from a meaningless life and from the unending fear of death. Isaiah calls us again to rejoice in his salvation, for God's desire is to give us eternal blessings. Those whose faith is conditional and temporary, and those whose faith is in human righteousness, will inevitably be let down. Yet those who trust in God alone will have a living hope that no one can take away.

The prophet also uses vivid imagery to describe the ultimate fate of the proud (using Moab just as an example). As Simeon said, Jesus will bring the rising and falling of souls (Luke 2:33-35), yet this will take place contrary to earthly human standards. Humans admire and imitate the proud and the ambitious, yet their happiness will be very temporary. God instead lifts up the humble and those who trust in him instead of in themselves.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> How does Isaiah use the image of a mountain here and elsewhere? What does the 'mountain' tell us about God? What kind of 'feast' does Isaiah promise here? What does the image of a shroud suggest, and in what sense does God wipe away our tears? Why does Isaiah keep warning the proud? What does this tell us about what it means to have faith in God?

Walking With God (Isaiah 26:1-11)

This song of praise reminds us of the transcendent blessings that the faithful receive from God, while also cautioning us that the remnant must worship God alone, and calling us to see God as he truly is. God alone can give us the lasting peace that gets us through the world's trials and storms, God alone can bring lasting meaning to our lives, God himself has always been our deepest need.

The prophet now helps us understand what it means to 'walk with God', that is, the characteristics of a day-to-day relationship with God. He illustrates this first with the image of a city with walls and ramparts of salvation (26:1-6), using this simple illustration as a call for us to reconsider what security, safety, and peace mean from God's viewpoint. Moreover, only God can open the gates to this city; we cannot enter with our own righteousness nor with our talents.

The Israelites were used to thinking of safety and security as being represented by the physical city of Jerusalem*, so Isaiah calls them, and us, to realize how much better it is to have an eternal security that puts the troubles of this world into their proper perspective. Moreover, God promises perfect peace to those who remain faithful to him, and this promise also is better than any promise of worldly success and ease (John 16:33). God is the Rock eternal, and he gives us things that last.

> * From David's time to Isaiah's, Jerusalem had successfully withstood all foreign attempts to capture it - yet in coming years, it would fall numerous times.

Again we see God laying low the lofty city, for Jesus has now made clear that our deepest needs cannot be satisfied by worldly things nor by our own accomplishments nor our possessions. There is no shortage of examples, both in history and at the present time, of humans who have and do things that everyone else envies, and yet who always feel a desperate need for more. Instead, when we follow Jesus, he helps us to be content with who we are and with what we have.

The yearning of our souls has always been for God himself, just to know him and to be in his presence (26:7-11). All of the worldly things that humans desire are substitutes for this, and when we don't realize this, then we will often stumble and go astray. God's grace and God's presence are the kinds of blessings that cure the soul and the spirit of our restlessness and frustration.

Thus, walking on God's path will seem level, in spite of the problems we face in this world. His path will seem smooth, even though we face hills and valleys, since God is with us to give us what we need. His name and God's renown have always been our heart's true desire (2 Corinthians 5:1-2). Moreover, when we walk with God, his grace overflows to us, and he gives us many blessings that we do not even need.

God's hope for each of us is that we will realize that his desire is to meet the deeper needs of our souls, and to give us blessings greater than earthly possessions. Isaiah points out that human nature causes us often to resist what God teaches us, yet in his extraordinary patience and in his unfailing compassion God continues to guide and teach us each step.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> What kind of 'strong city' is Isaiah describing? Would this image mean something different to his original audience? What kind of 'perfect peace' could we have even in this world? How do these verses help us understand what it means to trust God? Explain what it means that our souls long for God. What does this tell us about God and about our walk with him?

Your Dead Will Live, Lord (Isaiah 26:12-21)

Isaiah now contrasts human striving and planning with God's design and his purposes. Human efforts and human rulers cannot save us, yet God can give life to the dead. We see also the contrast between human stubbornness with God's patience and his eagerness to be with us in our distress. When we can barely whisper a prayer, God is near, and he can give us comfort and reassurance.

In our earthly lives, there are many persons who presume to rule over us or to have authority over us, yet God's name alone should receive glory, honor, and reverence (26:12-21). God alone can establish peace for us, and indeed everything worthwhile we can accomplish, God himself does for us. Moreover, God has already brought meaning to this earth, and Jesus has already brought God's salvation near.

When we accept our weakness, when we come to God in distress, he can renew us and comfort us. When we realize that all along we needed God every moment, when we can barely whisper, God reassures us that he is near and he hears our prayers. In contrast, Isaiah depicts the persons of the earth in their restless strivings and planning, comparing their efforts to the pains of childbirth, yet all these labors are empty; they do not bring salvation, instead 'we gave birth to wind'.

God himself has always been the Rock, God himself has always been what we needed, so human efforts cannot bring any new meaning to the world. Instead, we can help others to see God and to see their need for God and to see the great blessings he gives us; and we can reassure one another that God is with us, to remind one another to look beyond the world's appearances.

To those who look above, who see through the distractions and temptations of the world, and who seek eternal things, God offers a new birth, a new life for those who were dead. Unlike the world's frantic activities, God raises those who dwell in the dust, he revives us with the 'dew' of his words and his care.

Again Isaiah reminds us that the Lord is coming out of his dwelling, and again we see him disciplining those who need it. As before, this does not apply to a specific situation so much as it calls us to clarify our spiritual perspective. God's presence may bring fear to the unbelieving, yet this again is a reminder of their need for him. God's advice is to hide in him, our refuge from the world's noise and uproars. God's presence gives us hope and peace and joy.

As Jesus reminded Martha and Mary, we too will rise again (John 11:21-27). Jesus is indeed the resurrection and the life; he has already raised us from the dust of this world and has given us rebirth, and he will someday raise us to the eternal life of being with God. As Jesus consoled Martha, when we live by believing in Jesus, we have promises and a hope and eternal blessings that this world can never take away.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What does it mean to honor God? What does it mean to honor him alone? Why does Isaiah say that human strivings give birth to 'wind' instead of life and salvation? In what way does God raise us from the 'dust'? Why does the prophet use these images? What do they tell us about God and about ourselves?

- *Mark Garner, September 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Four: A Precious Cornerstone (Isaiah 27 & 28)

The prophet has detailed God's promises to those who believe in him and seek him, and now he begins to focus more closely on the foundation of faith that God desires for us to have. Since the world will not stop in its efforts to pull us back into its futility, Isaiah's warnings and his encouragements are just as vital to today's believers as they were originally.

Purification & Redemption (Isaiah 27:1-13)

In a series of poetic images, Isaiah now recaps in brief what he has told us so far. The world is being shaken, disciplined, and humbled. Those who allow God to cleanse and purify them will know God and will belong to him. His eyes always see everything, everywhere, and he will gather up those who seek him with our hearts, irrespective of our time, place, or earthly status.

The inner struggle that the prophet describes is part of our earthly nature, so we shouldn't feel guilty that we often have to face it (27:1-11). Thus Isaiah uses 'Leviathan', a mythical great beast of the sea*, as an image for human nature and its restless strivings. The Leviathan image originated as an encapsulation of the ancient fears of the sea and its strange creatures. Metaphorically, it is used as an image of uncontrollable force**.

> * Most often pictured as a giant sea serpent. Leviathan was generally used figuratively, rather than referring to one specific animal, and descriptions of this creature were usually fanciful, not meant to be taken literally.
>
> ** The image of 'Leviathan' is also used elsewhere in the O.T.; for example, see Psalm 74:12-14 and Job 41.

As the Leviathan image implies, we cannot control our own nature for very long with our will power or plans or good intentions. Only God can bring us the peace and self-control and contentment that we need. Moreover, the promise of Leviathan's defeat finds it complete fulfillment in Jesus, who overcame the world.

Isaiah then returns to a previous image, the Lord's vineyard, which (see Isaiah 5:1-17) despite God's lavish care, has fallen into decline. Now God laments that it would not be nearly so bad if the problem was only briers and thorns, which he could easily burn away, instead of their distance from him. Because of this, it is only through discipline and atonement that God can proceed, as Isaiah has so often said.

Yet as always God waits with his arms wide open, calling them and us to come near him (Matthew 11:28-30), to let go of our human agendas and our false hopes, so that he can give us peace and rest and security for our souls. God reminds us that he is not angry when we drift away and he must discipline us, rather he is showing us his mindfulness and his understanding of what we need.

As Isaiah again describes the atonement that God will bring, we see again the divine discipline this will necessitate, and we again see the image of his holy mountain, where God gathers those who turn our hearts to him (27:7-13). We see on the one hand the ways that humans try using force and fear to get what they want, while God drives out his spiritual foes with one 'fierce blast', an image that again finds its complete fulfillment in Jesus' one sacrifice for the sins of the world.

We see God was threshing the (human) grain fields to seek out those who longed for his truth. Even in Isaiah's time, God was ready to receive anyone, anywhere, who sought him. So God rejoices in Assyrians, Egyptians, and those of all nations joining the remnant of Israel itself, along with those of us who remain faithful to the truth, and he gathers us on the 'holy mountain'. This is the fulfillment of what Isaiah has been proclaiming so far.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: In what way has God conquered 'Leviathan'? Why couldn't we have done this? What does the prophet want us to learn from his re-use of the vineyard image? What does this chapter tell us about atonement and forgiveness? What kind of gathering is he describing in verses 12-13? How does this sum up what Isaiah has said in the rest of the book so far? What does this tell us about God's nature?

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

While worldly persons desperately seek the perishable rewards ('wreaths') that this earth offers, God wishes to give truly valuable blessings to his remnant. Those who pursue this world's rewards willingly engage in things that are bad for their souls, only to 'gain' things of little lasting value. The prophet reassures us that we do not have to follow this path, and God gives us better things.

Isaiah thus draws a vivid 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 behavior that typifies the worst of worldly activity, yet the image applies to all of the forms of worldly intoxication. The wreaths the world awards are indeed all like flowers that soon fade.

> * 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 also used wreaths of laurel or other evergreens.

The Lord, though, is a glorious and lasting crown for 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 sometimes confusing for believers that God never details exactly what heaven will be like; he only promises eternal life. This crown of life (James 1:12), God himself, is our ultimate reward.

Unfortunately, as Isaiah now describes, worldly futility extends even to the views people can have about God (28:7-15). Again the prophet reminds us of the obvious destructiveness of sin, since the world can relentlessly exalts certain sins, and it tells us that some sins, such as pride and selfish ambition, are actually virtues. So Isaiah reminds us that all sin is destructive to our souls.

The next few verses make a different point entirely. The 'do and do, rule on rule'* approach to God that Isaiah satirizes here is, of course, common in any era. Relying on pat answers to tough questions about God, and drawing up a list of rigid do's and don'ts, miss what matters most to God (John 5:39-40).

> * The text in the Hebrew is deliberately meant to be nonsensical, so it is difficult to translate precisely, yet the main point is relatively clear. Isaiah is reminding us that the ritualistic, law-oriented approach to God

cannot draw us closer to him, for it overlooks some of the most important aspects of God and his desire for us to know him.

Isaiah calls these and other forms of worldly living a 'covenant with death', an agreement to focus on surface things and appearances and temporary things, a choice to create a 'god' who does what we desire. The prophet calls us to set aside all of these patterns, for God indeed is alive, and he has made a far better covenant with us.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What kinds of 'wreaths' might we pursue today? What do these tell us about our real needs? In what sense is God a crown, a wreath for us, and why is this so valuable? Why is the 'do and do, rule on rule' approach easy to fall into? What instead does God want? What does Isaiah mean by a 'covenant with death'? How does God help us to avoid these pitfalls?

A Stone In Zion (Isaiah 28:16-29)

In contrast with the false hopes and flawed foundations of the world, God offers us a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation, from which to live and to find hope and meaning. 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 fearful, yet it simply takes humility and trust before God.

The stone laid in Zion is a symbol familiar to us from its New Testament uses (28:16-22). Besides the Messianic implications, it reminds us of the steadfast, permanent nature of God himself. God is always trustworthy and sure, and as the prophet implies, God is a time-tested stone (1 Peter 2:4-6, see also Romans 9:30-33). We also see the sense of lasting peace this cornerstone gives us even as we endure the world's trials and fears.

No matter what sins and worldly follies we may have indulged in, God is able and willing to annul our 'covenant with death'. Instead of worshiping worldly things in return for the cheap 'wreaths' they provide us, God gives new meaning and direction to our lives, and he fills our spirits with the bread of Jesus and with his words, and he gives us his Spirit to live within 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 God's perspective, not the earthly. Moreover, God and his ways will often seem puzzling, strange, and he calls us to fix our thoughts on unseen, eternal things.

God's wisdom is magnificent, far deeper than we can begin to fully understand; so to help us understand this, Isaiah uses a straightforward analogy, as he 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. These are not ends in themselves, so during the next stages of farming, the crop is treated differently, because the good grain must be separated from the useless portions of the plant.

But farmers would use only sticks and rods to do threshing; they didn't use sledges, cartwheels, or other large implements that would crush and destroy both good grain and useless chaff.

In the same way, God doesn't put us through trials that we couldn't get through. Then, finally the grain must be prepared for actual use. Grain must be ground, made fine. Likewise, 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.

Jesus explains another aspect of God's ways when his parable tells us how the seed sprouts and grows (Mark 4:26-29). Even though we barely understand it, a little seed can be nurtured to produce life, growth, and nourishment. Likewise, when God nurtures us and guides us, we may often barely understand, yet God can give us a harvest of the fruit of the Spirit in every season.

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

- *Mark Garner, September 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Five: In A Very Short Time (Isaiah 29:1-30:17)

Since God alone can provide a sure 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 week's scriptures, the prophet will discuss the inadequacy of human means, and he reassures us of what God can give us when we trust in him instead.

The Siege Of Ariel (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 and hearts. God gladly does everything that he can to help us to realize and understand his spiritual truths, but our own fleshly resistance often makes this 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 in part as a symbolic name for Jerusalem; moreover, the word itself refers to the altar hearth*, the location on the altar where fire consumes an offering. It is thus a place of direct contact between God's presence and the physical world. Being 'Ariel' carries considerable significance, yet it also comes with responsibility.

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

In the Old Testament, God often reminds the Israelites that direct contact between the divine and the unclean could have drastic consequences. Jerusalem still wanted to have closeness with God, yet they persistently sought this by their own efforts that couldn't have ever cleansed them. Thus Jerusalem eventually finds itself besieged, not merely by foreign armies, but by the God who loves them and who desires to purify them through discipline.

We today are also 'Ariel', a hearth on which we offer the living offering of our hearts and minds. Thus we too will often undergo discipline. Yet no matter how harsh this discipline may sometimes seem, God regretfully imposes it, and moreover he promises that it can end abruptly. Jerusalem will be brought low, not as punishment, rather so that they would 'whisper out of the dust', that is, to seek God more humbly and reverently.

Thus the siege of Ariel will be broken suddenly. This in part foresees God's promise to release them from oppression by the Babylonians when their purpose was finished. For us, this promise is fulfilled when we turn humbly to God in our troubles, so that in spite of what may be happening in this world, we can be reassured of God's nearness and can be reassured of his care for us.

The prophet then describes the spiritual blindness and spiritual illiteracy that are unfortunately present in any time and place (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 includes the prophets and seers (the 'eyes' and the 'heads'), since these problems can affect even religious leaders. As the prophet depicts one person lets a seal stop him from reading the elusive words of the scroll, while another claims not to be able to read, these are satirizing the rationalizations that human nature uses for not taking the time to understand God's teachings.

The implied call to hear, to understand, and to accept God's truth is one that is a needed reminder for any era (Revelation 1:1-3). 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 worldly methods.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Explain the significance the image of Ariel. How did it apply to Jerusalem (and the Israelites)? How does the Ariel symbol apply to us? How would the siege and relief of Ariel apply today? What can we learn about God's nature from these images? 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?

The Humble Will Rejoice In The Lord (Isaiah 29:13-24)

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. Yet in a very short time, when we set aside worldly ways and humble ourselves, God can help us see everything more clearly, and he can help us understand who he really is and what he really wants from us.

Isaiah describes a problem that is chronic in every era: those who 'worship' God with their mouths but not with their hearts (29:13-16). Sometimes this can be deliberate false worship, yet more often it is just meaningless worship (see also Mark 7:1-8, where this Scripture is quoted). We often forget what worshiping God really means, and simply go through the motions. Worship is meant to be acts and words that show what we truly believe to be important and valuable.

The prophet is firmer about the worldly wisdom that even believers can fall into, so he emphasizes its limitations and its insignificance in the face of spiritual reality (see also 1 Corinthians 1:18-19, where this Scripture is quoted). God tells us that he will humble the wisdom of those who think they are wise, and he will also astound us with wonder upon wonder, through the cross of Jesus and also in the ways he works in our lives (1 Corinthians 1:27-31)

God alone is able to reverse the fortunes of this world, so that the deaf will hear and so that out of the gloom the blind will see (29:17-24). Moreover, God assures us that when we trust in him instead of in human methods or human abilities, in a very short time we can see him more clearly, his words will give us the comfort and peace that they are meant to give us, and indeed the humble and those who realize that we are needy will rejoice in knowing God.

Thus these promises are not about outward things - instead, when we open our hearts to God, in a very short time our despair can turn to hope. When we set aside the world's distractions and fix our minds on eternal things, in a very short time our desperation can turn to peace. When we consider God's eagerness to give us grace, no longer will our faces grow pale. When we turn away from worldly thinking, even the wayward can gain understanding of God and what matters to him.

> 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? Why does God deliberately frustrate and oppose earthly knowledge and intelligence (what does he mean by this)? What does God promise that he can do 'in a very short time' when we call on him? What does this tell us about God and our relationship with him?

In Quietness & Trust Is Your Strength (Isaiah 30:1-17)

Isaiah vividly describes God's appeals to those who insist on taking the world's paths that are full of false hopes and that eventually let us down. God's blessings are far greater and far 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 and trust.

God knows us, and he understands that often we seek protection or satisfaction or purpose from 'Egypt', that is, from worldly things (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 for false security, not by faith.

> * 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 Isaiah 31:1-9 (which we'll read next week).

Likewise, the help of today's 'Egypts' is useless when it comes to our deepest needs. 'Egypt' might make us feel safe or wealthy or important, yet these fleeting feelings will leave us desperate for more. Thus the prophet's harsh description of Egypt, the world and its false hopes, are not scolding us nor condemning us, rather it is a compassionate reminder to out our hope in God alone.

God also knows that sometimes we are simply unwilling to listen to his words (30:8-17). Human nature sometimes just wants God to 'tell us pleasant things' instead of calling us to think about things above, and sometimes human nature doesn't even want to be reminded of God's presence - yet God remains near because of his care and desire for us to know him. Thus Isaiah also compares our sins with a crumbling wall, waiting to fall on us, to remind us of our need for God.

Instead of seeking meaning and security from worldly accomplishments, or from earthly pleasures, we can find true salvation in godly repentance and spiritual rest (verse 15). It is not physical rest, but a spiritual rest for the soul*. When we turn from human restlessness and worldly ambitions, and wait for God's will to guide us, this relieves our souls of an oppressive and unhealthy burden.

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

Indeed, in quietness and trust in God is our strength, since these allow God to make his strength perfect in our weakness. Human nature instead wants to ride off on 'swift horses' (2 John 1:9), yet our spiritual pursuers will be swifter, for we cannot outrace our real problems by human means. And, as we'll read next time, the Lord longs to give us the grace and compassion we need.

God is concerned for us when we endure the pains and disappointments of this world, he never leaves us, and in due time he will lift us up to his side (1 Peter 5:5-11), and in a little while he will restore us and renew us. We wait in hope for the Lord and in his faithful care and in his unfailing love (see also Psalm 33:16-22), which he has expressed so clearly in the message of Jesus.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> What kinds of 'Egypt' might we rely on today? How can we let God help us instead to rejoice in seeking the truth? Why is salvation found in repentance and rest? How does strength come from quietness and rest? What does this mean in practice? What does this tell us about God and what it means to know him?

- Mark Garner, October 2018

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Six: The Lord Longs To Be Gracious (Isaiah 30:18-31:9)

Isaiah again reassures us that God desires only to be good to us; so when we must endure afflictions and hardships, God will use them to teach us, to refine us, and to purify us inwardly. Then he returns to the image of relying on 'Egypt' and trusting in the world's ways. As he does so, Isaiah also reminds us of how God watches over us all to protect us.

How Gracious Will He Be (Isaiah 30:18-26)

Isaiah now emphasizes that, in spite of all of the resistance that our human nature puts up against God, God always longs to be gracious to us. Given the chance, God will rise up to show us compassion and to give us guidance and understanding. So Isaiah again reminds us to wait on the Lord, and to acknowledge our need for him every moment.

God always longs to be gracious to us, and when we cry for help, he hears us (30:18-26). Despite human pride and hardness, God's compassion is always far greater than his anger can ever be. He is quick to 'rise up' to show compassion when we give him the chance. This is one of God's defining characteristics, and we can fully appreciate it when we reject our idols and let him help us see things from his point of view.

Isaiah has reminded us that in quietness and trust is our strength and our salvation (see Isaiah 30:15), so now he says that blessed are all who wait on the Lord, instead of following their own ways. In patience, trust, and reverence we can find true life and light. Jesus reminded us of this when he overcame the world by his compassion and faithfulness, rather than with force and threats.

Although we often must endure the 'bread of adversity' in this world, the moment when we humbly turn to God he will help us to 'see' things that we couldn't have understood when we were relying on ourselves. Likewise, we will 'hear' him showing us the way, not a literal path, rather the way he asks us to think and live, so that we may walk in it.

When we learn to rely on God, he can open our eyes so that we can understand and appreciate his words and his ways (John 9:35-39). Then, as Isaiah has often reminded us, we will gladly throw away our idols (see also Isaiah 2:19-22), and will stop trusting in the things of this world. Once we get a taste of God's gentle hand guiding us into spiritual truth, we can start to see the useless nature of our earthly idols. In turn, this shows us even more clearly our need for God.

These promises are followed by the images of plentiful nourishment and bright light ('the sunlight will be . . . like the light of seven days'). These illustrate the difference between truly relying on God compared with relying on ourselves - and it can help us get free from the frustration and restlessness that even believers often feel. God simply asks us to walk by faith in him and in his love, to revere him, and let him be the one to show us the way.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Why is God so eager to have compassion on us? How can this help us to seek and know him? What does it mean to cry for help to God? Explain what the promise in verse 21 means (hearing a 'voice' showing us the way) and how it can

be fulfilled. How can this motivate us to throw away our idols? What does it mean to throw them away? What form do the promises of nourishment and light take today?

The Lord Comes From Afar (Isaiah 30:27-33)

Here we see imagery of God coming full of wrath and fire and smoke, apparently intent on condemnation and punishment. Yet what God is punishing is not 'bad' people, rather he is punishing sin itself - and for this to become reality, for this to happen completely, finally took place on the cross. Thus we see this bringing joy to those who walk by faith in God.

God comes from afar to meet us (30:27-33), and is depicted as being surrounded with smoke, fire, cloudburst, hail, and other symbols of tumult - fortunately, this is figurative, rather than literal. It depicts the clash between spiritual light and spiritual darkness, and God's desire to cleanse us thoroughly of sin. Thus our hearts will rejoice when we trust in God, the Rock eternal, and walk by faith. Yet his presence and his words can still be unpleasant to those who persist in pride.

The prophet's images imply that everyone will see God, that they will hear the Lord's majestic voice, and will acknowledge his majesty. 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, and most of all our own mortality, is readily apparent to all, even to those who resist it. This is also why Jesus alone is able to fill our truest needs (recall, for example, Hebrews 2:14-15).

Moreover, God struck down 'Assyria', sin itself, on the cross. Yet he did this in a compassionate and gracious way, for Jesus took human form to be struck and beaten and crushed for our sins (Isaiah 53:4-6), then after all of this suffering, he would also rise from the grave to overcome also death (Matthew 16:21). Each of the blows Jesus suffered was striking against sin and against its destructive power and against the chokehold of the accuser and of the world's futility.

Everything has long been prepared by God, he has fulfilled his many good promises in Jesus, he has given us everything we need to believe in Jesus and receive eternal life (2 Timothy 1:9-10). He has also warned us of the consequences of faithlessness, yet in his great patience and compassion he refrains from an immediate, complete, final revealing, hoping for a while longer that the faithless will turn to him.

The prophet then uses the image of Topheth, a refuse dump* just outside of Jerusalem to stand for both the squalor of human sin and also the dire fate of being separated from God in eternity. God uses this to help us realize how empty and hopeless our existence can be when we put our trust in anything other than God himself, so that we may realize our deep need for him.

* Topheth was an ancient location in the Valley of Hinnom that began as a site for Canaanite sacrifices. Later it became a refuse dump, where fires were 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 as a symbol of their concept of 'hell'. See also, for example, 2 Kings 23:10 and Jeremiah 7:31-32.

<u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> In what sense does God 'come from afar'? What implications does this have? How can our hearts rejoice simply from God's presence? Explain the figurative imagery in verses 30-32, and how it is fulfilled in the cross. How has God 'punished' sin on the cross? What does this tell us about God and his nature? Why does God want us to learn from the images in verse 33?

Return To Him (Isaiah 31:1-9)

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 acknowledge and honor God as Lord and Savior, so the prophet thus calls us to let him help us resist the temptation to rely on 'Egypt'.

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 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 human longing for easily attainable earthly things at the expense of the more lasting spiritual blessings that God wants to give us.

Both historically and symbolically, even believers have often longed for 'Egypt'; yet Egypt, both historically and figuratively, offers only false hopes. Besides the oppression the Israelites had once faced, Egypt also 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, for only Jesus does this (Philippians 4:7-9).

In contrast, God is like a flock of peaceful birds hovering overhead, watching over us, looking out for us, cautioning us when we need it, guiding us back when we wander from the path. The prophet also uses the imagery of the Passover, since indeed God passes over us and rescues us in a new way through Jesus. Once again, we see how God rises to shield us and deliver us.

Whenever we stray, God simply calls us to return to him and to reject our idols. This world's authorities and rulers do not have the answers that really matter, and can never provide lasting security, compassion, and mercy. Our earthly possessions are a gift of God's grace, and they are meant to be temporary, for they too cannot save us nor can they provide lasting meaning. Again, all of these can be found in Jesus alone, for he has overcome 'Assyria', not by a human sword*.

> * In chapter 37, we'll see a short-term, partial fulfillment of this, when God miraculously turns back the Assyrian army when it was besieging Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:35-37).

The imagery of the Lord's furnace and his refining fire does not need to terrify us when we understand our need for God to cleanse us, and when we realize that his intention is to sanctify us, not to punish us. Earlier, Isaiah told Jerusalem that it was the furnace and the altar hearth (chapter 29), and in that context he simply reminded them to seek God in humility and reverence.

When we ask God, he will give us truly good things (Matthew 7:7-11), and he often gives us better, lasting things than what we asked for. When we seek him with our hearts we will find him, for he has always been near in the hope that we would reach out for him. When we knock on his door, it will be opened, for God was always knocking the door so that we might let him into our hearts.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Why does Isaiah keep mentioning Egypt? What can we learn from this? How is God's presence like a flock of birds hovering overhead? What does this image tell us about God and what he wants to do for us? How has Jesus overcome 'Assyria'? How can the image of God's refining fire be positive?

- *Mark Garner, October 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Seven: The Fearful Heart Will Understand (Isaiah 32:1-33:6)

As Isaiah continues his comparison of true foundations and faulty foundations, he emphasizes our need for God and our dependence on God. The prophet uses several different images to help us understand this, and he continually emphasizes that believers and unbelievers alike depend every moment on God's mercy and care.

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 God can change this when we turn to him. God's wisdom and grace help us to perceive and understand the world around us from a new and more meaningful perspective, as God opens our eyes and ears to the truth.

God's promise to bring a king who reigns in righteousness looks ahead to the coming of Jesus (32:1-8). In the short-term, from time-to-time God would also send the Israelites faithful believers, perhaps a ruler or a prophet, who would be like a refuge from the storm; that is, to encourage them to develop a new, godly perspective, to stop trusting 'Egypt' and the world's false hopes. So in our own small way, we can reassure one another that Jesus is the Way we were looking for.

Jesus is our true refuge from the world's storms and trials and harshness, and he alone brings living water to this parched, thirsty desert. In this life we will always face a barrage of the world's false hopes and its deceptive promises, yet Jesus gives us a living hope, a hope in eternal things, and he can help us to look beyond the world's appearances when we walk by faith.

God calls all of us to let him renew our vision and our hearing, to see "with the eyes of your hearts" (Ephesians 1:18), to develop a new perspective. This, again, is something we cannot do with human ingenuity or will power; it takes remaining close with God, letting him write his words on our hearts, for so often they are quite contrary to the world's teachings. Genuine understanding can come only from God, and only Jesus can bring lasting reassurance to our fearful hearts.

The world's perspectives and its values have always been hopelessly distorted, and its authorities and experts cannot change this. The world teaches us to value the trivial, and to trivialize what is of great value. It considers sins as virtues and considers virtues as sins, and it often convinces churches and believers to cater to its whims and to import its faulty viewpoints. The moment when we start relying on ourselves, it can become difficult to see the difference.

When we resolve "to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified", God can help us see things for what they truly are (1 Corinthians 2:6-10). We can learn what really matters to God, and we can begin to see the difference between worldly wisdom and God's wisdom.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Explain his Jesus fulfills the images in verses 1-2. How might we also 'give water in the desert' to someone? How does Jesus open our eyes and our ears? How does he fulfill the promises in verse 4? Why does the world fail to see things for what they really are? Is this true in all areas of life? How does God change our perspectives? What does this tell us about what it means to know God?

Till The Spirit Is Poured Out (Isaiah 32:9-20)

Isaiah now explains the need for those who seek God to seek him by faith, to walk by faith, and to trust in things that earthly eyes cannot see. The prophet gives us a vivid reminder to stop taking confidence in outward appearances, and he calls us to acknowledge our complete dependence on God, so that his Spirit may be poured out on us to renew us.

Isaiah's abrupt call to strip away the outward appearances is a reminder to look beneath the surface, to focus on what we really need and what matters most to God (32:9-13). Complacency* and false security are constant struggles in any era, for human nature often finds it very easy to be deceived by, or even to become prideful in, our physical surroundings. So Isaiah calls us to look at ourselves as if we didn't have these things, to help us see whether we put undue meaning in them.

> * Although Isaiah specifically mentions the women as being complacent, this is a metaphor for human nature and its dependence on outward appearances. Whether men or women, we all tend to overvalue these things.

Many of the things we have and do in this world are neither good nor bad in themselves, for it is instead our perspective on them that matters. The blessings we have are gifts of God's care and love for us, not because we earned them or deserved them. It matters to God whether all of these things do or do not point us to him. Moreover, we all must undergo hardships. These too are usually because we live in a fallen world, so what matters most to God is how we handle them.

Moreover, once we realize how little lasting meaning or protection we get from earthly things, and when we understand that what we need most are eternal things, then God can bring renewal from above (32:10-20). As we do this, we will realize that without God we are abandoned and deserted, without any genuine direction or hope in this world.

God knows that without him we are living desolate lives, regardless of any outward appearances; so when we humbly turn to God, he gives us his Spirit and gives our lives direction and meaning that come from on high. When we don't rely on our strength and open our hearts to God, he clears away earthly distractions and agendas so that he can teach us to walk in step with his Spirit.

The following images of making the desert fertile help us to understand that God wants to give us spiritual peace and assurance in him, a righteousness that depends on Jesus and not on ourselves, quietness and confidence that do not depend on earthly events or circumstances. God indeed is our peaceful dwelling place, a place where we can always go, a place nothing in this world can take away (Philippians 4:6-7).

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Explain what Isaiah means when he tells us to mourn and 'strip off your fine clothes'. What does God hope this will accomplish? In what ways are we desolate and abandoned without God? Will this always be easy to see? Why does Isaiah use the image of God 'pouring out' his Spirit on us? In what sense does God transform the desert into a fertile field? What does this tell us about God?

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

Even believers often have their spiritual vision clouded by the world, and it can be discouraging to watch earthly events and to see the disorder and confusion. We can also become tempted by

the same things that the worldly desire. Yet all this is much easier to bear when we accept that God alone is the sure foundation, who provides us with what we really need.

The Lord is our strength every morning, for only by knowing him can we find meaning and lasting hope (33:1-4). With this in mind, Isaiah sets up another contrast between those who rely on force, deception, and other worldly ways, compared with those who understand our need for God. The prophet understands how discouraging it can be to see how in this world how those who live like this frequently benefit from their sins.

Even so, God bears with them in the hope that they too will turn to him - and when they don't, their end is appropriate, for they have been caught in their own web, an endless cycle they cannot escape. Selfish ambition, deceit, violence, and other such sins may be romanticized in popular culture, but in reality these erode the souls of those who practice them, and lead to dreary, meaningless lives.

The more that we are humble enough to see things clearly, the more aware we are of our soul's longing for God, the more eagerly we will call upon God to be our strength. The metaphors in verses 3-4 illustrate how God restrains his power - if God were ever to unleash his full power upon this earth, it would be as if the earth were engulfed by an unending 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 often represent an overpowering and uncontrollable force, and human helplessness when faced by it. The noise of a locust swarm also suggests a force that causes confusion and disorientation. (See, for example, Joel 1).

God is our sure foundation, for our good times, for our bad times and for all of our times (33:5-6). God is a sure foundation on which we should build everything else; he is the source of all we need or will ever 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. Instead of spoiling us now with an unending supply of this world's treasures, God wants to give us better and lasting treasures (Matthew 6:19-21).

The key to this treasure that God offers us is not human talent nor will power nor extensive knowledge nor even many good deeds. The key is the fear of the Lord, the reverence for how vast his understanding and splendor is, the humble acknowledgment of him as the transcendent Lord and Creator who made all things, and the acceptance that we must rely on him each moment.

These thoughts are echoed in Jesus' parable of the foundation on the rock (Matthew 7:24-28). A flawed foundation may hold up for a while, yet only the sure foundation of Jesus can always help us endure the storms and winds and disappointments and defeats, for our foundation promises eternal blessings.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> How can we learn to acknowledge God as our constant source of strength, as our foundation? What kind of treasures does God have in mind for us? What does this tell us about God and his nature? Explain in your own words what Isaiah means by 'the fear of the Lord'? Why is this the 'key' to God's spiritual blessings? What does this tell us about our walk with God?

- Mark Garner, October 2018

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Eight: Now God Will Arise (Isaiah 33:7-34:17)

Isaiah's contrast between trusting in the world and trusting in God now reaches a climax. Using some of his most vivid images yet, the prophet depicts how vulnerable we and this world are, and how quickly God could bring things to an end. At the same time, he provides us with a look at the spiritual blessings that God wishes to give to those who walk by faith in Jesus.

You Who Are Far Away, Hear (Isaiah 33:7-16)

From time to time, God makes his presence especially clear, at least to the discerning. Then also, the time will come someday when God will rise to declare the final end of this world. But those who seek God earnestly now, and who allow him to open their eyes and ears, can already see him rising above the world's ways and rising in the hearts of those who hold fast to him.

God's hope for his dear children is not for us to rule this earth, but rather that we may see how Jesus has risen above a fallen world, and that we may let him help us too rise above its emptiness (33:7-12). Despite the world's external glitter and its constant outward activities and its endless supply of false hopes, it is a bleak spiritual 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.

> * After describing the grim day-to-day realities of living in this world, the series of geographical references in verse 9 is meant to portray even the most fertile and desirable regions as becoming wastelands, as a parallel with the outward appearances the worldly rely on to conceal their inner emptiness.

God is always exalted in comparison with the world, as he waits patiently instead of demanding immediate recognition. He is indeed near us all, and it only takes us reaching out for him humbly, and he will help us appreciate how much more God offers than the world does.

Isaiah simply asks us to acknowledge what God has done (33:13-16), and in doing so we will realize God's splendor and our constant need for him. 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. Yet when we walk reverently with God, we can indeed dwell peacefully in his presence as he refines us and guides us and reassures us of eternal things (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Moreover, the prophet tells us that even in this world, those who walk by faith in God, those who do not pursue the world's ways, will find refuge like a 'mountain fortress' in being with God. Likewise, God supplies with living water and the living bread of Jesus that nourishes our spirits and satisfies us even in the world's spiritual famines.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Explain how the somber images in verses 7-9 apply to any era. What are we meant to learn from them? How can God be exalted in a world filled with sin and sorrow? How does our understanding of God affect our perspectives about events in this life? What does it mean to find 'refuge' in God?

Your Eyes Will See The King (Isaiah 33:17-24)

Humans hold an extraordinary number of contrasting views of God, so God has promised that we will be able to see the King, our Savior, for who he really is. God's presence can transform fear

into calm, and he gives us a home with him, a place where our souls can find rest and healing and understanding and mercy.

To those who see things more clearly, the King has great beauty (33:17-24). For those who trust in him, his presence can turn our terror into peace (as in Matthew 8:23-27), not necessarily by taking away our problems in this earth but by giving us the hope of rising above this world and its troubles, by reassuring us that Jesus is with us and he understands what we're going through.

We again see the promise of a 'peaceful abode', a place that will always endure, a place with untroubled rivers where we aren't tossed back-and-forth (Ephesians 4:14-15), for it is indeed the Lord alone who will save us. Even when our earthly lives may seem to be in disarray (as in the images of our rigging and our sails being tangled), God protects us from spiritual illnesses, and he has forgiven our sins.

This in turn allows us to see this world from the surer perspective of eternity, instead of being led astray by the world's loudness and its distractions. Trusting in the heavenly King gives us a foundation that nothing in this world can destroy.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What can we 'see' already about Jesus? When we understand who he really is, how can this change the ways we think and respond to situations in this world? What kinds of spiritual blessings does Isaiah mention in this passage? What does this tell us about God and our walk with him? How can we learn better to appreciate these kinds of blessings?

The Starry Host Will Fall (Isaiah 34:1-17)

The tumultuous imagery in this chapter calls to mind the future end of this world. Yet again we see a dual-meaning prophecy, and Isaiah also uses the nation of Edom as a symbol, not literally. The images in this chapter have been fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus, and they are also a reminder that he will return someday.

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 (in Isaiah 24) to describe the temporary nature of this earth. Here, though, he places the emphasis on God's unyielding wrath towards sin itself, rather than against individual sinners. God's decision someday to do away with the physical universe is not an arbitrary one; it is necessary in view of his own holiness.

The fearful images here should not be taken literally in all their details, yet they do remind us that everything 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. Since God could create the universe, then for him to do away with it would be even easier. These images of the overwhelming power of God also remind us to walk humbly and reverently.

Isaiah spends much of this passage referring specifically to Edom, which serves here as a stand-in not only for all worldly nations and rulers, but for sin itself. Edom was closely related to Israel, but it held a long-standing antagonism towards its brother nation*. It thus makes an appropriate metaphor for human nature and for the human sin that separates people from knowing God.

> * Edom is the nation descended from Esau, Jacob's brother. 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. The book of Obadiah also uses Edom as an image in a similar way as Isaiah does here.

We are all created as brothers and sisters, whether we are presently believers or unbelievers, and we were created to seek and know God. Yet sins like pride, anger, prejudice, envy, and selfish ambition separate people from one another and from God. 'Edom' thus stands for all such behavior and all such attitudes.

Yet God's response, his form of 'vengeance', his way of expressing his wrath against sin, takes a most unexpected and compassionate form. Instead of drenching the world with the blood of every sinner, he has instead drenched the land with the blood of Jesus, which cleanses everyone who believes in him and follows him (see also Isaiah 63:1)*.

> * Recall the imagery in Isaiah 30:27-32, and later in Isaiah 63 we see the same imagery used in anticipation of the Messiah who would proclaim the year of redemption. There too Jesus uses the symbolism of Edom and Bozrah in the same way.

Therefore Isaiah's prophetic imagery about the 'year of retribution' (34:8-17) is not directed at the physical 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 turn to him and seek forgiveness, and to remind believers to appreciate our own need for God's continual mercy and grace.

Thus in laying 'Edom' desolate, God has both exposed the emptiness of worldly thinking and the futility of trusting in human strength and talent, and has also cautioned us that sometime that the world itself will disappear and will be replaced by eternal realities. In upholding Zion's cause, then, God is revealing the need for him that all of us will always have.

Isaiah goes on to depict in some detail the land of 'Edom' being turned into a kingdom of animals. The imagery of owls, goats, and desert creatures recalls the opening verses of the book, when Isaiah compared human resistance to God with the way that animals accept the way God made them, so that in their own way these creatures acknowledge God as their Creator.

Here, these animals represent those who accept the message of Jesus, those who understand our need for God and his guidance and his forgiveness. For indeed God's Spirit has gathered us together, and he has given us a place that we will indeed be with him forever. Moreover, as we'll see in Isaiah 35, God will bring life and hope and healing to this harsh, unforgiving desert.

Jesus quotes Isaiah 34 when he reassures us that after our distress in this world, he and his angels will gather us from 'the four winds', from one end to the other, from every place and every time (Matthew 21:29-31). Indeed, Jesus is also doing this now, for whenever someone turns to him, he gathers us to his heavenly pasture, where we can find rest and reassurance for our souls even amidst the world's storms.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Why does God use these fearful images of destruction? What are we meant to learn from them? Why does God use Edom as a symbol for sin and human resistance to God? How has Jesus' blood 'drenched the land'? What does this tell us about God and his nature? Why does Isaiah use animals to represent those redeemed by Jesus? What does this tell us about our relationship with God?

- Mark Garner, October 2018

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Nine: Streams In The Desert (Isaiah 35)

After the complicated imagery in the previous chapter, Isaiah now turns to familiar images to help us understand what God wishes to give to us. In so doing, the prophet also shows us God's splendor and his understanding. Isaiah's depiction of the Way Of Holiness also encourages us to appreciate the spiritual blessings that come to those who walk by faith in Jesus.

Rejoicing In The Desert (Isaiah 35:1-2)

The imagery of rejoicing in the desert expresses what God wants to give to us, and it gives us a glimpse of his heart. All of these images depict life emerging in unexpected places and in unexpected ways. In turn, this is a reassurance from God that when we are at our weakest, when we are most confused, God will guide and uphold us in ways that could only have come from him.

Like a desert bursting into bloom, God can calm us or comfort us or help us at unexpected times (35:1-2). Isaiah uses these paradoxical images to help us understand what God is promising. On one hand, this world will always be a spiritual wasteland, so we shouldn't expect earthly events to give us reassurance or relief. Yet God can still make this wilderness blossom, as he gives us guidance and as he gives us reminders of the eternal blessings he gives us.

Just as God can bring unexpected life, he also gives new life to everyone who puts our faith in the grace and love of Jesus; he cleanses us with the blood of Jesus, renews our minds with his words, and his Spirit gives life to our mortal bodies in spite of our flaws (Romans 8:9-11). Like the crocus that blooms in the fall instead of in spring*, God can comfort us in the midst of sorrow, he can enlighten us when we're most perplexed, he can show us his compassion at our worst times.

> * Many varieties of the crocus blossom in autumn, while others blossom in spring. The variety of crocus that was (and is) native to Israel is an autumn-blooming crocus.

In this way, we can see the splendor and the glory of the Lord, when hope or encouragement or peace or mercy comes at an unexpected time, like light in the darkness, like an oasis in the desert, like a kind word when we needed it. God uses our struggles to teach us about our need for him, and when we trust in him instead of in ourselves, he can carry us and can make clear how much he cares for us.

As the desert symbolism continues, we'll see God's more of compassion for us, and it will also remind us that God has always desired to show us his love and his understanding, and to give us the greatest gift of knowing him.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> In what ways does God provide the faithful with life, hope, encouragement, or peace where it would not normally be expected? What does this tell us about God's nature and about our walk with him? What kinds of 'deserts' or 'wastelands' might we find ourselves in? What 'blossoms' might God give us? Can we tell why we are in these wastelands?

Do Not Fear; Your God Will Come (Isaiah 35:3-7)

As the desert imagery continues, the wastelands and wilderness areas now suddenly become full of life, the weak and fearful become strong, and the afflicted become healthy. Again we see how the presence of God can transform our minds and our perspectives, and how he gives us a hope that we couldn't have ever found in earthly things.

Isaiah now describes the desert transformed, a renewed land* where, in spite of the burning sands and parched ground, even the afflicted and vulnerable will have their needs met (35:3-7). Here God nourishes our souls and provides the fruits of the Spirit. This is an implicit reminder to walk by faith in Jesus, for there will often be times when God's grace and promises will need to sustain us, instead of worldly things.

> * Earlier, Isaiah used a different set of images to describe different aspects of this new land in Isaiah 11:6-9.

We see renewal for the weary, strengthening for the weak, and reassurance for the frightened. We also see the image of God's vengeance - on sin, and his retribution - against sin itself (recall Isaiah 34:8). Jesus has indeed endured untold afflictions to save us from sin and spiritual death, and indeed his message comforts our anxious spirits as he renews us inwardly.

These images of renewal, strengthening, and reassurance illustrate God's desire to give those who turn to him in reverence and humility the kind of true life that the world cannot offer: lasting meaning, enduring hope, and a life without worshiping self and idols. These blessings are meant to sustain our spirits in what still remains a wasteland.

Again we see the blind having their eyes opened, and the lame leaping like a deer, promises that Jesus fulfilled physically to help us understand God's full intention to help us see things from his perspective, and to heal our spiritual ailments (Matthew 11:4-6).

In this renewed desert, water doesn't merely trickle, instead it gushes forth in the wilderness (John 4:13-14). Jesus brought the water of life into this wasteland, and indeed it relieves our spiritual thirst, it calms our anxious spirits, it renews us and brings us a sense of life that depends only on being with God.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> Why does Isaiah use this desert imagery? What are we meant to learn from it? How does this help us understand what God's promises here mean? How are they fulfilled even as we still live in the 'wilderness'? What do they tell us about God and his nature? Can they help us in our prayers and our prayers for one another? Explain the image of water in the desert, and what it can mean to us.

A Highway Will Be There (Isaiah 35:8-10)

The prophet now reiterates God's promise that there will be a highway for those who seek him and reach out for him. On this highway, there is nothing unclean, and there are no deadly dangers; there is nothing but singing, gladness, and life. The blessings of this highway will be realized fully when we are with God in eternity; yet even now we can experience them.

Isaiah has used the image of a highway* before, and now he tells us what it is like to walk on this highway (35:8-10). Here the prophet calls this highway, The Way Of Holiness, for indeed there is nothing unclean on it. For even now God cleanses us continually as we follow Jesus and acknowledge our need for his grace (1 John 1:5-7), so that he may continue to be near us.

> * See Isaiah 11:16 and 19:23; and compare the promises and the imagery.

Believers do face dangers of all kinds in this world - the same physical dangers as everyone else faces, plus the accuser's attacks on our faith. Yet God promises us that when we walk on his highway, he will protect us from spiritual dangers that are too strong for us. He reminds us to resist the accuser (James 4:7-8) and remain in Jesus, for no one can snatch us out of his hand (John 10:28-29). In Jesus, no outside force can take away our faith or God's grace.

Moreover, nothing can prevent us from praying to God and having the singing in our hearts that comes from knowing that God cares for us and he will give us what we need. Nothing can stop us from pondering his words, and sharing the gladness that comes getting closer to God.

God's highway takes us to a land nourished by God's presence (Revelation 22:1-2). The water of life flows freely to those who hold fast to him, and he will give us fruit of the Spirit in every season. And he can heal the wounds that nothing in the world could have cured.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> What is this highway meant to symbolize? How does God show us this highway, and how does he guide us on it? Why does Isaiah call it, The Way Of Holiness? In what sense can we now experience the blessings of walking on this highway? In what sense will we experience them later? What does this highway tell us about God and how he wants us to seek him?

- *Mark Garner, November 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Ten: The Lord Hears, The Lord Sees (Isaiah 36 & 37)

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. At that time, King Ahaz ignored God's advice, but this time things will be different.

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, dangerous ruler. Now it is Judah's turn to face him, and the situation will call for its people and its king, Hezekiah, to choose whether to rely on God or to rely on worldly means. The Assyrians' approach mirrors the accuser's own tactics.

The Assyrians start their assault on Jerusalem* with a campaign of intimidation (36:1-12). 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 (see the notes on Isaiah 22:9), Jerusalem could still withstand a lengthy siege. So the Assyrians hoped to demoralize the defenders and get them to surrender.

> * 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 previous diplomatic relations with Egypt and Cush, which were an ill-conceived means of defense against Assyria (see the notes to Isaiah 18-20).
>
> ** Sennacherib's account in the Assyrian chronicles claims that he captured 46 cities in Judah, a revealing exaggeration. He apparently counts many small villages and settlements as 'cities'.

So the Assyrian field 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 deception, two very common tactics that are especially seen in the accuser's snares. The Assyrians know that a direct assault will be difficult, but also that intimidation can cause confusion and can make a foe forget its own defensive resources.

> * Referred to in some versions as the Rabshakeh.

Much of what the field commander says contains enough truth or at least plausibility that might make it persuasive, especially to a frightened audience. For example, the commander quotes Hezekiah's ban on high places* out of its context, making it sound as if Hezekiah doubted God's power. In the same way, when the accuser also threatens us or tempts us, he uses distortions, convenient excuses, or plausible speculations to try to make us consider doing what he tells us.

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

Then the Assyrian commander adds persuasion (36:13-22). He knows his intended victims, as indeed the devil knows us when he attacks, and he smoothly counters the king's officials' request

to converse in Aramaic*, rather than Hebrew, because they don't want the soldiers and residents of Jerusalem to hear the Assyrian threats or demands. Fortunately, these fears are unnecessary.

> ** 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.

Instead, the commander tries to build false hopes in the Judeans if they simply surrender, and what he says seems appealing, though his promises of giving them peace and luxury are deliberate lies. Again, all of this can be compared with the common snares we face - indeed, these were used as early as in Genesis 3:1-5.

The Assyrian commander is also well-informed about King Hezekiah. 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 makes it easier for them, and they heed his advice. The officials just report everything to the king, and then await his instructions.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: From a worldly point of view, was anything false with what the Assyrian commander said? What situations might be similar to the threats and deception the people face here? How can we let God protect us in them? Why did the king tell the people to remain silent? What can we learn from this about our walk with God?

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 takes a genuine faith in God, 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.

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). Hezekiah must have learned from his father's mistakes, and his 'mustard seed' of faith lets God get him through this time of trouble.

In the request he sends to Isaiah, the king acknowledges his fear, and even asks the prophet to "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 first arrange for Sennacherib to be distracted, possibly as a way of giving even the cruel Assyrian king a chance to change his perspective.

> * 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 to have realized that someday God might decide to allow the same thing to happen to Judah, if it became necessary.

Sennacherib is indeed temporarily distracted, needing to deal with a rival from the south, but he misses his opportunity, for 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.

Upon hearing back from his messengers, Hezekiah prays (37:14-20), having been reassured by the prophet's reply. He honors God as the only God and the only true source of hope and help, and he addresses the Lord reverently. His prayer for God to see and hear what is going on is not a lack of faith, rather it is his humble acknowledgement of his dependence on God. For he is well aware that the king sees everything and hears everything, and he knows everyone's heart.

Hezekiah fully recognizes the danger from Assyria for what it is, not at all minimizing the earthly danger. Yet he responds to this fearful danger without resorting to the world's weapons (2 Corinthians 10:3-5); for after hearing Isaiah's words of divine assurance, Hezekiah prays in hope of deliverance, seeing it as a way "that all may know" that the Lord alone is the only living God.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What expectations does Hezekiah have when he first consults Isaiah? What can we learn about God from the prophet's response? Why might God have only distracted Sennacherib at this point, rather than destroying him now? What can we learn from Hezekiah's prayers? What can we learn about what it means to have faith in God?

God Knows, God Hears, God Sees (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 know that God will protect our souls from the worst they can do.

Isaiah now sends a message to the Assyrian king, in which his and 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 human methods or will power. For when evildoers frighten us or attack us, they are indeed insulting God and demeaning God, who will respond in his own way.

Isaiah's message is best considered in its entirety and its vivid imagery. For example, the prophet's rhetorical question, "have you not heard?" is directed in part against the unbeliever Sennacherib, but just as much to reassure believers, to remind us of God's vastness and his wisdom, to encourage us to transform our perspective about earthly matters (1 Peter 1:23-25).

God's caution to the proud Assyrian ruler that, "I will make you return by the way you came" implies that his earthly power and his conquests will soon disappear. This image reminds us, among other things, that everything returns 'by the way it came', and that everything in this world came from nothing and will someday disappear. This reminds us to be thankful for what we have, without depending on earthly things for lasting meaning or hope.

Isaiah also has a message for Hezekiah (37:30-35). God will deliver his people, though afterwards they will need to learn to live by faith, as God provides. For Judah has, in part, contributed to the

situation by its ill-advised worldly alliances. So for two years Judah will need to rely on natural growth, not agriculture, for its food. God often reminds us too how helpless we are without him.

God will protect them and sustain them because of his own zeal, his desire for them to know him, his promise to keep them near, his eagerness to show them compassion and care. Thus the prophet also speaks of a remnant of survivors that will take root and will produce spiritual fruit. God is aware that many of the Judeans did not really change inwardly, so he promises that he will always preserve a "band of survivors".

The fate of Sennacherib and his army (37:36-38) illustrates the ultimate bitter fruits of worldly ways. The army practically self-destructs*, while Sennacherib goes home in humiliation, later to be killed by his own sons**. Most earthly malefactors will not always suffer such direct punishment for their misdeeds, for in God's forbearance he often gives them chance after chance, since being separated from God forever is a far worse fate than earthly death.

> * Sennacherib's chronicle describes this sudden withdrawal, though does not acknowledge the loss of all of these soldiers, because it was the practice of Assyrian chronicles never to acknowledge anything negative.
>
> ** The assassination actually happened 19 or 20 years later. To God, the time in between was unimportant, since Sennacherib would not again be a real threat to Judah.

Paul describes God's spiritual armor that protects us from the worst dangers, the deceiver's traps and schemes (Ephesians 6:10-18). All of these heavenly protections are gifts from God, the truth that we learn from him, the peace that comes from knowing that he is with us, and all the rest are blessings that we couldn't have bought or earned. God can make us stand because of his love for us, and his desire to be with us forever.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: Why would Isaiah address the Assyrian ruler? What can we learn from his remarks to Sennacherib? Explain the prophet's message to Hezekiah. What does this message mean for us, and what can it teach us about our relationship with God? What are we meant to learn from Assyria's sudden defeat? What do we learn about God and his nature from these two chapters?

- *Mark Garner, November 2018*

THE SURE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR TIMES:
STUDIES IN ISAIAH 20-39

Notes For Week Eleven: 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 near, he is always ready to guide us, and he can teach us at any moment. And his perspective on matters on this earth can be quite different from ours.

A Personal Request (Isaiah 38:1-9)

The unusual situation 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 a personal request from Hezekiah. The king's interactions with God show us some more aspects of God's viewpoint on our lives in this world.

We first hear a surprising prophecy (38:1-3, see also 2 Kings 20:1-11), 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. Yet even as weak and depressed he was, Hezekiah acts faithfully by turning to God, expressing his sorrow, and asking for God's mercy.

> * 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, God gives Hezekiah a reprieve (38:4-9). God has taken note of the king's prayer and tears, and he promises that Hezekiah will live for fifteen more years. Moreover, God grants Hezekiah's request for a sign of assurance (as indicated in verse 22), so to confirm his willingness to add these years to the king's life, God causes a shadow in the palace hallway to move backwards* (compare this with Jesus' act of kindness in Luke 7:12-16, and the crowd's response).

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

It is never made completely clear why God announced Hezekiah's death, and there are just a few hints why God granted his special request (see questions below). Yet God's compassion and his awareness of our most important needs are clear. Hezekiah himself at times lost his focus, yet he always walked humbly and reverently before God. In all that Hezekiah does, even his mistakes, he maintains a clear awareness of his dependence on God's mercy and God's grace.

> <u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> What kinds of situations might make us feel as Hezekiah does here? Do we know what he may have expected when he prayed? Can we see any reasons why God allowed him to live longer? What is the significance of the sign of the shadow? What does this situation tell us about God and our walk with him?

Hezekiah Meditates On His Recovery (38:10-22)

In Hezekiah's meditation on his recovery, his thoughts and feelings about 'the land of the living' cause us to ponder the ways and the reasons that God acts and doesn't act in our earthly lives. Like much else in Isaiah, this chapter reminds us that humbly seeking the truth is in itself of spiritual benefit, and it can often be as valuable as, or even more so than, knowing all the answers.

Even after his recovery, the king remembers the gloom he felt when he thought he would die (38:10-14). His regrets upon leaving the earth sooner than he expected are not sensual pleasures or riches. First, he was discouraged that he could no longer see God 'in the land of the living', for he valued his earthly relationship with God (yet we can be reassured by 1 Corinthians 13:12).

He also expresses his regret about no longer being able to look on his fellow humans. Hezekiah senses, without quite being able to put it into words, that often the true importance of events, decisions, and developments in this world is found insofar as they help us to understand our need for God and encourage us to seek God. Hezekiah has often learned and found encouragement from these things; so though his fears are misplaced, they reflect his awareness of God.

Upon his recovery, in view of God's mercy and his compassion, Hezekiah can only ask rhetorically, 'What can I say?' (38:15-22). Indeed, God himself had done this, and the king has learned to appreciate life in this world from a new point of view. His physical anguish and emotional distress have led him to walk even more humbly, and as he has also learned, our spirits find life in these things (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

When Hezekiah says to God that, 'the grave cannot praise you', he is not discounting the hope of being with God after his physical death*, instead he is pointing out how special it is to God that some of us love and praise him here, when we cannot physically see him or tangibly feel him.

> * Most of the ancient Israelites had a clear awareness of an afterlife, though they often held differing viewpoints on it.

Again we see that God sees things differently than we do. Also, here the only way Isaiah could truly help and care for Hezekiah was by telling the truth, to the best of his ability. Hezekiah, for his part, is a faithful servant, though one still full of weakness, just like us. So in all circumstances, he does his best to remember that everything truly is in God's hands, not in human hands.

> Questions for Discussion or Study: What can we learn from Hezekiah's regrets when he thought he would die? How can we apply what he learned from this situation? What else could we learn about God from how he handled the king's request? How does this situation compare with other times when someone was brought back to life or saved from death?

Guests From Babylon (Isaiah 39:1-8)

We can see some aspects of human nature in this account of Hezekiah receiving visitors from Babylon. Without meaning any harm, he may help cause 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 all of us.

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.

Babylon during the reign of Merodach-Baladan (or Marduk-Baladan) 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. So, the Babylonians are looking for allies to share with them the risk of opposing Assyria's power.

> * 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, and for some years he lived in exile, while an Assyrian puppet ruler governed the city of Babylon.

Hezekiah's nature makes him oblivious to any ulterior motives or unintended consequences. He simply enjoys displaying Judah's treasures to his guests (compare these with Matthew 6:19-21, and the implications). Despite Hezekiah's good intentions, it was probably an unwise thing to do, yet Isaiah's response does avoid any severe blame for Hezekiah.

Isaiah, learning about the Babylonian visitors, gives Hezekiah a stark look into the future (39:3-8). As he questions the king, the king's openness and honesty confirm that he acted honestly, not out of pride. Unfortunately, though, the information that the Babylonian envoys have discovered will one day give Babylon 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. This time there will be looting and exile, many of the very same objects that Hezekiah has just displayed will be seized and carted off to Babylon, while sadly 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 plunder and captives; and the final time they destroyed the city and enslaved all but the oldest and weakest residents.

Hezekiah's response seems at first rather ambiguous*, as he does not seem to mind, at least in part, because he is content in knowing that 'there will be peace and security in my lifetime' (verse 8). Though on the surface that it seems as if he has a sense of false comfort from this, he cannot have been pleased by the thought of what would someday happen. So he can only accept this news just as he has always accepted whatever God has told him.

Yet in spite of the king's mistakes, God surely must have appreciated Hezekiah's faithfulness enough to make sure that he himself did not have to live through the terrors of conquest and exile. God thus seems to have chosen to give the king the blessing of peace and security in his lifetime, and in any case he will have temporary comfort during his lifetime. And 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. For trusting in God and following Jesus can give us lasting spiritual comfort (Isaiah 40:1-5), whatever may happen in this life. God understands the 'hard service' we must endure here, he wants to guide us on paths that are good for our souls, and he wants us to see his full glory and the depths of his care for us.

And we have indeed seen God's glory in Jesus (John 1:9-14). Jesus is the Word made flesh, a light who gives us hope and guidance, he is full of truth and grace, and in him we can see God's understanding of our deepest needs and his eagerness to meet them.

<u>Questions for Discussion or Study:</u> What does Hezekiah's reception of the Babylonians tell us about human nature? Why might God have told him about the future fall of Jerusalem? How does Hezekiah take the news from Isaiah? Should we learn anything from it? What can we learn from these events about God's nature and our walk with him?

- Mark Garner, November 2018